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ABSTRACT

One teacher's experiences in incorporating non-hierarchic learning assumptions and values in the second language classroom, especially through the use of dialogue journals, are reported. In the first part, observations of accuracy-based classroom language teaching are contrasted with the meaning-based acquisition model. Six salient characteristics of dialogue journals and how they could serve as a vehicle for these learning assumptions are reviewed. The second part is a detailed account of experiences with dialogue journals, including illustrative journal excerpts. Issues such as setting up ground rules, student resistance, correction, topic generation, shifting teacher/student roles and their effect on teacher participation are discussed. The teacher's and the students' participation in the dialogue journal writing process are evaluated, emphasizing the crucial role of student/teacher reciprocity and mutuality in creating and sustaining the desire to stretch one's language use so dialogue can be maintained. (MSE)

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LEARNING PARTNERSHIP THROUGH DIALOGUE JOURNALS:
APPLYING NON-HIERARCHIC ASSUMPTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper, in two parts, presents the author's experiences of incorporating non-hierarchic learning assumptions and values in the L_2 classroom, specifically through the use of dialogue journals.

In the first part, the author contrasts her observations of accuracy-based language teaching in the classroom with her meaning-based language acquisition model. She reviews six salient characteristics of dialogue journals and how they could serve as a vehicle for her learning assumptions.

The second part is a detailed account of the author's experience with dialogue journals, including illustrative journal excerpts. Issues such as setting up ground rules, student resistance, correction, topic generation, shifting teacher/student roles and its effect on teacher participation are discussed.

The author then evaluates her own and her students participation in the dialogue journal process, emphasizing the necessity of student/teacher reciprocity and mutuality in creating and sustaining a desire to stretch one's language use so that a dialogue can be maintained.

ERIC Descriptors:

Adult Education, Dialogue, Interpersonal Communication, Second Language Instruction, Teaching Methods, Teacher Student Relationship, Writing Instruction, Written Language.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..1

PART ONE. FROM THE DRAWING BOARD: THEORY

CHAPTER ONE. HOW LEARNERS ARE VIEWED..................8

PIERRE'S STORY....................................8

THE DUMMIES 10

THE BANKING SYSTEM................................11

THE IMPACT OF THE BANKING SYSTEM ON L_2 LEARNING..13

HOW ENTRENCHED ARE WE?............................14

CHAPTER TWO. LEARNING ASSUMPTIONS: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS...18

ASSUMPTION ONE....................................19

Implications...........................21

As language learners...............21
Absent teacher technique...........21
Feedback...........................22

ASSUMPTION TWO....................................23

Implications...........................23

Communication......................22
Grammar............................24
Information exchange...............25

ASSUMPTION THREE..................................25

Implications...........................28

Student-generated topics...........28

ASSUMPTION FOUR...................................29

Implications...........................30

Me, myself and I...................30

ASSUMPTION FIVE....................................30

Implications...........................33

Error-free language................33
Grading............................33

ASSUMPTION SIX.....................................34

Implications...........................36

First things first.................36

ASSUMPTION SEVEN...................................37

Implications...........................38

SUMMARY..39

CHAPTER THREE. THE CONNECTION: DIALOGUE JOURNALS..41

A WORKING DEFINITION OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS........41

The journey is the destination..........42
No corrections..........................43
No lesson plan..........................43
Learning partners.......................43
Student-generated topics................44
Authentic language exchange.............45

MY INTRODUCTION TO DIALOGUE JOURNALS.............45

BRINGING MY ASSUMPTIONS INTO THE CLASSROOM...46

BACKGROUND.......................................48

PART TWO. IN THE TRENCHES: PRACTICE

CHAPTER ONE. THE GROUND RULES: GETTING STARTED......52

HOW OFTEN..52

WHEN...57

IN CLASSROOM VS. OUTSIDE CLASSROOM WRITING..59

FIRST STEPS....65
READY, STEADY, GO!....66
CHAPTER TWO. THE STUDENTS' SIDE OF THE DIALOGUE....67
EXPECTING RESISTANCE....67
HEY, WHAT IS THIS?....70
WELL, JANET, I'M NOT CERVANTES....74
NO RESPONSE....78
CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOPIC....79
MY LIFE IS BORING....82
'SPLAIN ME....83
CHAPTER THREE. THE TEACHERS' SIDE OF THE DIALOGUE....88
CORRECTION....89
TEACHER ASSISTS: CLARIFICATION QUESTIONS....92
TEACHER ASSISTS: MODELING....96
TEACHER ASSISTS: THE INTERVIEWER....100
Variations on the Interviewer/ Partner....105
EVALUATION....108
The dark side....108
The bright side....111
SUMMARY....112
CHAPTER FOUR. LEARNING PARTNERS....113
FOR TEACHERS:....114
Knowing students better....114
Cultural information....117

FOR STUDENTS:....................................120

Trust.................................120
American culture......................120
Pro-active voices.....................121

SUMMARY..123

CONCLUSION...125

WORKS CITED..130

People must learn to read
their own reality
and write their own history.

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy
of the Oppressed

INTRODUCTION

Dialogue journals are an impressively powerful tool for engaging students and teachers in an authentic communication experience. Their ability to provide a genuine, personal document of sometimes profound meaning inspire my loyalty and commitment.

In keeping with this commitment, while teaching in Spain, I submitted in April 1988 a workshop proposal to the Spanish chapter of the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) association on the use of dialogue journals in the classroom for their annual national conference.

I wrote about how meaningless and mechanical most school-assigned writing appeared to me. Instead of encouraging students to develop second language writing skills for the purpose of communication or discovery, the current use of writing in the classroom seems to relegate writing to a secondary role of practice and evaluative tool for grammar points. I have observed that beginning students are usually not given opportunities to write more than the cloze exercises and sentences drills found in their textbooks. Intermediate students may be asked to write a few paragraphs on a teacher-assigned topic. Advanced students typically write compositions which are corrected and returned. In all of the above cases, writing is used to support grammar practice and is evaluated in those terms. I have not seen many instances where grammar is used to support writing practice.

Dialogue journals were a way from me to incorporate meaningful written language in my classroom. Using Staton's definition, I explained in my proposal that a dialogue journal is

> a bound composition book in which each student carries on a private written conversation with the teacher for an extended period of time... dialogue journals are functional, interactive, mostly about self-generated topics...[dialogue journals] are not a method of instruction in specific skills; they provide opportunities to use newly acquired abilities in reading and writing.(Staton 1987, 1)

My proposal was rejected.

Twelve hours before the TESOL/Spain conference was to begin, I got a phone call: there had been a cancellation. Something about cloze exercises. Could I present my workshop the next day? I said "yes".

The sign announcing my workshop read "Writing Dialogues in the Classroom." When I introduced dialogue journals as the actual topic, those who had come to hear about cloze exercises left. The others interested in writing dialogues for their students left. A small group of twenty-five adventurous strangers and friends remained, and I began my workshop on dialogue journals.

By the end of the session, I had two requests from school directors to do my workshop for their teachers, and some excited teachers ready to incorporate the journals into their classrooms. I became known as the dialogue journal lady.

It has been a rocky road from beginning with dialogue journals to dialogue journal professional. Commitment to and blind faith in dialogue journals were starting points. It took some experimenting to find a system to introduce and maintain dialogue journal writing in the classroom that worked for most participants and that took into account my abilities and those of my students, my learning assumptions and the classroom situations in which I found myself. I struggled with such issues as how to present dialogue journals to my students, how to integrate dialogue journals into the classroom, and how to understand and deal with student resistance.

I was puzzled by questions of where to place myself in the dialogue journal process, what I wanted from a dialogue, who I was as a dialogue partner. The most basic philosophical definition of "dialogue" eluded me. In fact, these are questions that I have only been able to formulate through the writing of this thesis. At the time, they were only expressed as vague discomforts.

The overall purpose of this paper is to share this process of experimentation, questioning, struggling and learning when I applied my assumptions, through dialogue journals, to the classroom.

The paper is organized in two sections. The first section, titled "From the Drawing Board: Theory," includes a presentation of how traditional education views the learner, and, in contrast, how I view the learner. I will describe my learning assumptions, born from my view of the learner, and give examples of implications and implementations. I will then describe dialogue journals as they connect, point by point, to my assumptions and share my own introductory experiences with this medium.

The second section, "In the Trenches: Application," brings the theory into the field: what happened when I used dialogue journals? Here, I describe and analyze my experiences as a dialogue journal teacher. The section is divided into three chapters which examine the students' side of the dialogue, my (the teacher's) side of the dialogue, and a synthesis in terms of what we learned about each other through the dialoguing process. In the concluding chapter, I affirm the importance and value of dialogue journals in my experience.

The tone of this paper is purposefully informal and conversational. Readers report feeling as if I were in the room, talking to them. This corresponds to my vision of my imagined reader: a friend and colleague who either wants to try out dialogue journals, and wants to hear my experience, or who, struggling herself, wants to compare notes.

This paper is also aimed at the teacher who, while not thinking about using dialogue journals in particular, has always wanted to do more with writing, but who always thought writing for authentic reasons, whether for communication or for art, would be too hard for her students. It is for the teacher who teaches lists of verbs, and is looking for ways to help her students make sense or meaning out of them.

Lastly, it is for the teacher, who, like me, when deviating from the traditional grammar-based syllabus experiences a nagging feeling of "supposed to," and who, committed to a more meaning-based, learner-centered approach to classroom language learning, deviates anyway.

As will be obvious in this paper, I am very much reacting against an educational philosophy which has powerfully influenced the educational systems I have seen and which I consider to be unjust and, at times, destructive. While I try to be as fair as possible in portraying this state of education, it is important for the reader to understand that many of my experiences, as shown in this paper, support and have contributed to a view of traditional education as something with little redeeming value. It calls to be spoken out against as much as my own less traditional assumptions should be spoken for.

In this way, using dialogue journals in the classroom has been a political act: an attack against the system. Their political value is one reason why dialogue journals have been so important to me, and why I have been so willing to both zealously use them with my students, and zealously inform colleagues about their use.

This is an experience paper. My own life experiences are liberally included for the reader. I make relatively little use of the experts. This choice both reflects and supports my core belief that our experiences are valuable and that our best insights into universal issues such as learning comes from studying our own particular, specific reactions.

Every piece of fiction is partly autobiographical and every autobiography is partly fiction (Rousseau 1953, 17). To better sell dialogue journals, and myself, I would have liked to have been able to present a flawless application of my learning assumptions. But that would have fictionalized this account. The reader will see the trial-and-error nature of my work with dialogue journals, the process behind the choices I made, inconsistencies between my stated assumptions and their application and just plain mistakes. It is only by being honest about how I worked with dialogue journals that I gain insights into my learning issues. I hope that by sharing the details of my legwork, that is, what went into setting up and using dialogue journals, I might save another dialogue journal teacher some time and struggle during her period of experimentation.

PART ONE: FROM THE DRAWING BOARD: THEORY

CHAPTER ONE

HOW LEARNERS ARE VIEWED

> I'm not aware of too many things,
> I know what I know, if you know
> what I mean.
>
> Edie Brickell and the New
> Bohemians, "What I am"

Pierre's Story

It was the summer before I started college, where I was to major in French. I was a nurse's aid in a convalescent hospital in Southern California. I worked in the maximum care unit, for people who could no longer control their bodily functions.

Pierre was one of my wards. He was a massive man, a stroke patient. He didn't respond when spoken to. He was always being hauled around, like a bag of mammoth potatoes, lifted from bed to wheelchair, to toilet, to wheelchair.

One day, when I was feeding him ice cream, I started speaking to him in French, just for fun. Because his name was Pierre. I asked him if he liked ice cream.

He said: "Oui" [yes].

I was shocked. I continued the conversation in French:

"What's your favorite flavor?"

"Vanille."

He was a native French-speaker. We had literally not been speaking his language. Once we used meaningful words, we found that he could stand and walk and talk. His inertia had come from not understanding the instructions. When he tried to talk to the orderlies and nurses, his French had been taken for senile gibberish. Thereafter, whenever the orderlies wanted him to do something, they sought me out to interpret. He responded every time.

I remember this incident with pain and anger. It ignites my sense of injustice and indignation of not having our intelligence granted. How many times and how many people are told that they cannot function when they can? That something is too hard when it isn't? That they don't know something when they do?

The Pierre experience also affected my view of language use. In the classroom, we had been Americans speaking to each other in French. French was a play language, and we used it to practice learning it. But when I spoke French to Pierre, it served a very concrete, basic nearly life-saving communication function. It allowed him to move. The language had a purpose in life. In my eleven years of studying French in the classroom, it has never taken on that same color as when I first used it with Pierre.

The Dummies

The following example gave me an awareness of what happens when the predetermined curriculum does not connect with the learners:

I was asked to be a reading assistant for a class of "emotionally disabled" high school sophomores when I was a senior. They read at a fourth grade level and were a very rough lower-middle class group. The flashing of switch blades was not unusual. Neither was coming to class high or drunk.

They felt stupid because they couldn't read. I thought they were stupid too, at first. But I talked to them. I don't know how I had the courage or openness. I soon found that they knew how to dissemble and assemble radios and television sets. They were near-professional car mechanics. They knew all about rock music. These functionally illiterate people were skilled, sensitive and very angry beings. I was impressed with them, and they were somehow gratified that an honor student was impressed.

I honestly don't remember the subjects of the reading materials with which we worked. They were certainly not about rock music, cars or electronics. I wonder what would have happened if those "dummies," as they called themselves, had been given car manuals to read, or a books on television repair. I have to think that their reading level would have dramatically improved, because they would have been reading about something that they both knew and cared about.

School was failing them and they were failing school. Like Pierre, in his French world, they lived in a world largely unacknowledged and incomprehensible to those in charge and were, in their way, as dysfunctional as Pierre was in his. Instead of being shifted from bed to toilet, they were being shifted from grade to grade. They were just as voiceless as Pierre.

The Banking System

This latter example from the early seventies is only one of many that I have witnessed in education, both here and abroad. I am encouraged by changes at the elementary level. But it still seems to be the norm in other levels that the students' task is to receive what their faculty has deemed valuable in a predetermined order, without connecting it to experiences from their own lives. The idea that their experiences could be formally incorporated into the curriculum, or even more radical, that their experiences could form the core of the curriculum in order to facilitate their learning is rarely considered and even more rarely implemented, in my opinion.

Paulo Freire captures for me the essence of this kind of non-participatory education in his Pedogogy of the Oppressed. In explaining what he calls the "banking concept of education," he defines the teachers's task to be to:

> "fill the students with the contents of his narration - contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity... Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor...the teacher ...makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat...the action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling and storing the deposits..." (Freire 1970, 57-58)

Charles Curran in Counseling Learning in Second Languages refers to this kind of system as a "dead structure:"

> which simply demands that the learner reflect the knower in order to please him and so protect himself from a poor grade or classroom group humiliation...one of the frequent consequences...is to deaden learning and to take away from it all the excitement and fresh bloom of coming to new life. (Curran 1976, 56)

This type of education can only be successful within hierarchies of domination. The teacher's superior knowledge places her above her students. Her power is wielded by a final grade, classroom humiliation, as Curran points out, or a refusal to write a letter of recommendation. The biggest threat, in keeping with a hierarchical system, is that of failing the student and therefore impeding his progress up the rungs.

When people work together, side-by-side as partners, accepting differences in informational levels, skills and intelligence without assigning rank or evaluating others, there is, by definition, no hierarchy. For teachers to work alongside the students and to recognize that they can contribute something of value to their own learning process would be contrary to a system which relies on the passivity of those who are acted upon. Any real participation on the part of the students, beyond parroting, goes counter to the system, and, as Freire tells us, shatters it (Freire 1970).

The Impact of the Banking System on L_2 Learning

The last twenty-five years have brought a deluge of studies and findings in applied linguistics, supporting approaches such as the Language Experience approach (LEA) or Community Language Learning (CLL), where lessons are planned around student-generated topics. To my surprise and dismay, much of the language teaching that I've witnessed, in Spain, France, Zaire, and here in the U.S., and particularly for beginners, reflects the greater educational norm of not considering or incorporating the student's life experiences or desires. Unlike the French I used in talking to Pierre, classroom language is rarely attached to authentic use. Detached from real meaning, language is passed to the students in a disenfranchised form: words are taught in lists, verbs are conjugated and memorized in isolation, phrases are taught that are never used, poems are recited and then forgotten, tenses are presented in an order that doesn't correspond to their order of frequency in the world. It is useless, but correct language, inadequate for communicating what students need or want to express.

How Entrenched Are We?

It is hard to believe that so much of education could be based on a system that requires such a highly orchestrated system of class domination, or that teachers are willingfully and consciously engaging in this process. Our denial comes in part in that it is always hard to isolate factors that are so implicitly integral to our educational approach.

The grip of the banking system is felt most in its absence. I had an interesting exchange with a professor from the University of California, Los Angeles who was teaching a course in second language acquisition at the School for International Training, a School known for its participatory, learner-centered, experientially-based educational model. "Don't these students know the professors are God?", he shouted dramatically, "Why don't they just write down everything I say and stop asking me all those questions?" Although an innovator in the field of language learning, and in possession of the rare ability to laugh at his own discomfort when not in the higher rung of the hierarchy, teaching at a school not based on the banking concept of education was clearly a jolt for him.

Another example of the prevalence of the banking system in language instruction comes from a song by a Spanish rock group, Los Toredores Muertos, or the Dead Bullfighters. "In the Kitchen" was a hit song in 1988. It showed many of us teaching in Madrid how far we were from allowing authentic expression and communication in our classes. The lead stanza says:

My pencil and my book
are in the desk
My pencil and my book
are in the desk
My pencil and the book
are on the desk
My pencil and the book are
on the desk
that's right,man
My tailor is rich and my mother's in the kitchen
My tailor is rich and my mother's in the kitchen

While the stiltedness of the language might have been exaggerated to create a comic effect, my students, who brought this song to my attention, reported that it accurately reflects how and what they had been taught.

Another line, "I don't know where is Magdellana Street," went straight to the hearts of the teachers I worked with in Madrid. This is a structure that is taught in one of the functional/notional texts used in my school and Magdellana Street borders the school on its east side. My coworkers noted during a dialogue journal workshop, with discomfort, that one or more of the Dead Bullfighters could have been their students. Did we actually teach them this nonsense?

Can a textbook possibly provide the rich diversity of fascinating, surprising and purposeful topics that people naturally want to discuss in a dialogue? After five minutes of practice dialoguing, the teachers in my workshops always responded in the negative. They saw that even the most interesting textbook and most innovative techniques and teaching approaches still embody the banking system when the students' main task is to respond.

It is an interesting aside that the only place where the students' intended use of the language plays a role in curriculum planning is in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Even ESP doesn't usually go far enough, since, once the students' purpose is identified, such as medical English, the teacher still typically provides the examples and the text.

In summary, the banking concept of education is an integral part of education as I have observed it. It fosters attitudes that encourage and even demand that the students be passive and non-participatory. It places teachers in a superior position of overresponsibility. Clearly, the balance between the two parties is seriously off-centered: the students are taught to divorce themselves from their own legitimate experiences and follow the teachers' agenda while the teachers have learned to impose their agenda on the students, even at the risk of supplying them with that which they may not need or may already know. As long as the attitudes necessary to keep this hierarchy of domination intact are rewarded, teachers and students and language will be separated from each other. They will be missing the richness of being learning partners where all learn and explore together, and the language comes alive.

CHAPTER TWO

LEARNING ASSUMPTIONS: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The banking system of education is not a problem-solving, growth-promoting, thinking-oriented approach to learning. My experiences with it have had the positive effect of steering me towards a classroom where there is a learning partnership based on mutual respect between teachers and students, where students are allowed to bring themselves to the classroom, instead of leaving their experiences and preferences at the door, and where learners are allowed to use their brains, even if that includes a struggle and perhaps a less than perfect result.

In this chapter, I will describe seven assumptions I hold on how learners learn best. After each description, I will give examples of implications that logically follow from these assumptions. They are as follows:

Learners learn best when:

1. they are granted their own natural powers of learning
2. they are in a learning partnership with their teachers
3. what they are expressing in the new language relates to what they already know or want to know (Smith)

4. it is legitimate to study oneself
5. the main objective in the classroom is producing fluent language that clearly and accurately expresses their meaning
6. language is presented in an order that reflects the students' need to communicate rather than in a strictly ordered grammar-based sequence
7. they are exposed to the language they are studying as it is used authentically

1. Learners learn best when they are granted their own natural powers of learning

This assumption is the touchstone of my belief system. All my other assumptions and all their implications follow from this key assumption. Without faith in the students' abilities to figure things out, without a basic and honest respect for their own efforts, we are still anchored in the banking system which would have us believe that our students cannot learn without us.

In Writing and the Writer, Frank Smith discusses the brain and its natural capacities:

> The brain's capacity for learning is widely underrated...Many researchers in education and psychology might seem to regard the brain as a naturally inactive organ whose usual state is to be doing nothing, and which only occasionally learns, then only if particularly prodded into doing so. I propose to take an opposing view. It is the business of the brain to learn - basically, the brain does nothing else - and it is no more "normal" for the brain not to be learning than it is for the human musculature as a whole to be limp...(Smith 1985b, 162-163)]

We see that, if our brains are functioning normally, we are constantly learning. This is what we are meant to do. Because it is so natural, we are usually unaware of the process. We become aware that we have learned something when we realize that we understand something that we didn't understand before. According to Smith, learning and comprehension go hand-in-hand. To cite Smith again:

> ...learning and comprehension are not separable in the brain. We do not learn in order to comprehend, learning is a consequence of comprehension. When we comprehend what we did not know already, then learning takes place. (Smith 1985b, 166)

Underneath all the obvious differences in how their intelligence is manifested, learners are all capable, at their own levels, of feeling that spark when, guided by their innate ability to figure things out, disparate elements click together, and they "get" it. It is absolutely necessary to trust in this natural ability for learning, creating, problem-solving, describing, analyzing, deciding that we all have in us. As Paulo Freire says:

> Some of the dominant class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation...However as they move to the side of the exploited they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin. Their prejudices include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know. So they run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as harmful as that of the oppressors...They talk about the people but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more for his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor, without

that trust. (Freire 1970, 36,41)

The singer Joni Mitchell affirms in her song "Woodstock" that "Life is for learning." Note that Ms. Mitchell does not say "Life is for being taught." What a dismal image that brings to mind. In fact, no teacher, no approach, no system of rewards or punishments is more powerful than our untaught, and oft-times repressed abilities to teach ourselves what we need to know when we need it. Instead of seeing our students as the "empty vessels" needing to be filled with information--a view that goes against our natural way of being--my assumption is that our students are thinking, creative people with a capacity for action (Hope and Timmel 1984a).

Implications:

A. As Language learners:

Believing in our students' abilities to learn extends to believing in their abilities to learn languages. Being a polyglot is not a gift reserved to the Swiss, nor to Zairian villagers. I have never said of a student: "Oh, he's just not a language learner." Rather, I am continually amazed at what students can do when given an environment where they are accepted and respected as they are at that moment.

B. Absent Teacher Technique

Because the brain seems to work best at figuring out and then storing information that comes from new understandings, classroom activities work best when they are problem-solving and task-oriented. Hope and Timmel in their book Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers say that in order to break away from the banking process, the traditional teacher needs to be re-educated to understand that her new role is:

- creating a learning climate,
- posing problems,
- encouraging a process of search for causes and solutions,
- assisting the group to discover as much as possible for themselves.(Hope and Timmel 1984a, 99)

I give students a task within a framework, and then I give them classroom time to figure things out using each other as resources. I can walk away, sometimes back into the teachers' room, while they work the activity through in small groups. Sometimes I check in on the groups as they are working, giving support when asked. I let them teach themselves as much as they are able.

C. Feedback

The students are the true experts on their own learning process. Feedback, a short verbal or written summary of one's own reaction to a particular lesson or task, becomes an indispensable tool with which students describe what helps and hinders their learning, and how they see themselves in the process, on a regular basis.

2. Learners Learn Best When They Are Viewed as Learning Partners by Their Teachers.

Students and teachers are already in a learning partnership, no matter what the model is. They are both contributing to and participating at some level in the learning at hand. We have seen the traditional tacit agreements of the banking system in which the student is the silent partner.

But, I am speaking of a different kind of partnership. Beyond refusing to posit absolute ignorance on the part of my students, and infallible knowledge on mine, I assume that I can learn from my students.

This demands humility on my part. If I believe that students are valuable beings to be respected, then I can no longer be above or below them, but with them. And being with them, we learn together. To again quote Hope and Timmel,

> Participation means dialogue. Dialogue is based on people sharing their own perceptions of a problem, offering their opinions and ideas, and having the opportunity to make decisions or recommendations. As Paulo Freire has said... everyone needs to be both a learner and a teacher. It is a mutual learning process." (Hope and Timmel 1984b, 3)

Implications

I recognize my students' areas of expertise, their knowledge of their own and other cultures, their life experiences and their opinions. My goal is to create opportunities for us all to be fully present in the classroom: bringing not only our knowledge, but our selves.

A. Communication

Instead of judging my students' language on how many errors it contains, I evaluate, along with the student, how well they have said what they meant. I receive the language (Graves 1982): is it awkward? Is it understandable? Is it clear? Is it appropriate? Am I reacting to the writer as I was intended to, or am I getting an unintended message? Further, I allow that what might seem appropriate, clear and understandable to me might not be to anther interlocutor. We can work together to find a way to understand each other. I am a reader, not a judge. (Dvork 1986)

B. Grammar

Based on the intuitions we all have, we are all grammar experts together. Before explaining a rule, I ask the students to discuss possible explanations together and present their explanations to the class. Often, their explanations are more than sufficient and only require my validation. At best, I learned something. At worst, they help me understand what part of the grammar point is causing misunderstandings.

By expecting them to teach themselves and me, we completely change the dynamics of classroom interaction. The grammar lesson becomes a grammar workshop. Students' answers are given credence and acceptance, encouraging them to generate even more numerous and more creative answers. They are more willing to take risks and to learn.

C. Information Exchanges

The students' areas of expertise are given a forum. In Spain, I asked my students to bring in articles from their local newspapers and to tell me in English what the articles were about. I learned a tremendous amount about the "hot issues" in the world around me. I chose the framework, a newspaper article, but they chose their own topics which became the content of the class that day. Instead of filling them up with information of my choosing, I received.

Respecting who they are as people in an L_2 classroom also extends to respecting their culture. Before teaching functions, such as asking for help or apologizing, I ask them to explain to me how the target function is performed in their own culture, if it is. Besides being fascinating for the teacher, it allows the students to bring themselves into the classroom. Finding acceptance, they are less resistant to trying on another people's ways.

3. Learners Learn Best When What They Are Expressing in the New Language Relates to What They Already Know or Want to Know

According to Gertrude Moskowitz, in Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Classroom:

> Those who drop out [of school]...do not do so because we haven't given them enough facts. It's just that the facts have no meaning for them.(Moskowitz 1978, 14)

I believe that we learn to communicate because we have something to say, not that we say something because we have learned how to communicate. According to Frank Smith,

> Children learn by making sense of words that are meaningful to them in context; they learn through comprehension. We have not become fluent readers by learning how to recognize fifty thousand words on sight; we have learned to recognize all these words in the process of becoming fluent readers, in the act of meaningful reading. (Smith 1985a, 64)

My own experience learning Spanish in Madrid serves as an illustration. I had studied Spanish for one year, ten years prior to my sojourn in Spain. Building on my memories of Spanish class and my fluent French, I became fairly functional. I was even proud of my largely untaught language acquisition, acquired by encounters with Spanish speakers when my husband and I found a preschool for our children, a dentist when our oldest daughter needed a root canal, an eye doctor for that same daughter when she needed glasses, matzoh for Passover from the only kosher store in Madrid, a store, I should add unmarked and hidden in an alley. The above represent examples of situations that were genuine emergencies, necessities, or keen interests. With each situation, our Spanish grew more fluent.

About six months into our experience, some colleagues from the States visited us. My husband had let slip that we never bought meat from the markets because we just couldn't figure out how. We had neither the language nor the cultural know-how to make an intelligent purchase, so we just didn't.

Our friends were astounded. Why didn't we get a guide to take us through the market? Why didn't we use our dictionaries? How could our cross-cultural skills be so limited that we couldn't figure out how to buy meat?

I was taken aback by the force of their reaction. Again, I was quite satisfied with our progress, even proud. I didn't see not buying meat as a failure.

Then it struck me. They had generalized our handling of one topic to be representative of how we processed all topics. The assumption was that all topics are processed equally, with equal zeal and care.

In fact, the opposite was true. When we wanted or needed to, we figured out how to communicate in Spanish. We used all the strategies, structures, vocabulary we had at our disposal. When we didn't want to or didn't need to, we were not always willing to work at figuring it out. Clearly, it was our atitude toward the topic that determined our succesful language acquisition, and not our language learning skills.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1964) found that teaching reading and writing was much more successful when tapping her students' hot topics. Children chose words to be put on cards, and kept in special files for each child. If a child forgot a word, the card was thrown away because it had not been important enough to remember. In this way each child had a collection of "key vocabulary," those special words which represent visions of the children's inner vision. The words are "organic," coming from the children, flowing from their creative channel, reflecting their dynamic life. This was how they learned to read and write, each one using their special words, which grew into sentences, paragraphs and pages. By letting students pursue what is special to them, they approach language learning with an attitude that helps them to learn better and faster.

Implications

Student-generated topics

Assigning topics, which students may or may not be interested in, and which may or may not motivate them towards greater language acquisition, is not the most profitable way to utilize the students' brains. Since language acquisition does not require the study of any particular topic, why not allow the students to generate their own topics with their own attendant vocabularies?

I encourage students to write about their own hot topics (Graves 1982). Everybody has one. It may be hard to get at, but it's there. A really hot topic, that special idea, theory, experience, situation that flows from our creative channels drives us to express it, despite mistakes, despite lack of vocabulary and syntax, despite that fact that we have been told it was impossible. Once harnessed, this power, this connection to our creative channel, can fly us to language use, instead of plodding along, word by word.

4. Learners Learn Best When It Is Legitimate To Study Oneself.

This is the major tenet of humanistic education, an educational approach in which, according to Gertrude Moskowitz:

> the content relates to the feelings, experiences, memories, hopes, aspirations, beliefs, values, needs and fantasies of students. It strives to integrate the subject matter and personal growth dimension into the curriculum. (Moskowitz 1978, 14)

Integrating the students' lives into the curriculum fosters an environment of trust, acceptance and interdependence by showing students that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are important within the classroom context. It opened up areas of discussion and discovery which that had been very much overlooked in school: Who am I? What is important to me? What do my experiences mean to me? How am I connected to what I am learning about? By acknowledging the affective side of the student, we are allowing the opportunity for the fullest possible kind of classroom participation.

Implications

Me, Myself and I

Students should be allowed and encouraged to use examples from their own lives, to write about their own responses to situations. It validates the inclusion of their everyday lives and everday thoughts in the classroom.

The following quote from Natalie Goldberg, in Writing Down the Bones, addresses this point:

> One Tuesday I was making ratatouille for lunch. When you make it for a restaurant, you don't cut up one onion and one eggplant. The counter was filled with onions, eggplants, zuchinis, tomatoes and garlic. I spent several hours chopping and slicing. Walking home from work that night, I stopped in the Centicore Bookstore on State Street and wandered up and down the aisles. I saw a thin volume of poetry entitled Fruits and Vegetables by Erica Jong. The first poem I opened to in the book was about cooking an eggplant. I was amazed: 'You mean you can write about something like that?' Something as ordinary as that? Something that I did in my life? A synapse connected in my brain. I went home with the resolve to write what I knew and to trust my own thoughts and feelings and to not look outside myself. I was not in school anymore: I could say what I wanted. Goldberg 1986, 2)

This is precisely what I wanted my students to get: whatever they want to write about is valid and worthwhile, academic or not. Even about fried eggs and eggplant. And even in school.

5. Learners Learn Best When the Main Objective in the Classroom is Producing Fluent Language That Accurately and Clearly Expresses Their Meaning.

There is nothing more paralyzing to language acquisition than the insistence on producing only right answers, and its companion, the fear of making mistakes. To avoid mistakes, we stay within the narrow boundaries of what we know we can do correctly and perfectly. Stephen Krashen refers to a "monitor," an internal language editor which monitors our speech for errors, and hopefully, can make corrections.

> Difficulties arise when performers, especially beginners, become overconcerned with correctness in communication situations, trying to check their output against conscious rules at all times. This overuse of the Monitor results in hesitancy and subsequent difficulty in participating in conversation. Ideal or optimal use of the Monitor occurs when second language speakers use the rules they have learned without interfering with communication. (Krashen and Terrell 1983, 19)

It is the desire and ability to communicate one's meaning that creates successful language experiences, not the number of correct sentences or words employed. Accuracy should be an issue only when its absence obstructs meaning. By letting up on our requirements for absolutely correct language usage, we can open up a flood of real communication.

I recall interviewing Professor Alvino Fantini of the School for International Training to evaluate his French level. Dr. Fantini speaks Italian and Spanish fluently, and a great deal of his "French" was cleverly disguised Italian and Spanish. Based on his actual French production, he got a low rating. Yet, the communication experience had been successful.

He had entered the conversation in a very playful, creative way and we understood each other. Had he felt pressure to communicate perfectly, to produce "right" answers, his tiny reservoir of correct French would have extremely limited his choices of topics and length of our conversation. I'm not convinced that he would have communicated more or better by attempting to be perfect.

But not expecting error-free utterances of our students is only part of the "no right answer" approach. By maintaining rigid guidelines for perfection, but understanding if our students aren't always perfectly accurate, we are staying in the same unequal, even patronizing relationship proscribed by the banking method. We have only loosened up our performance expectations. We still hold the standard over their heads.

Insisting that there is a right answer for every grammar point puts us on shaky ground. There are many versions of the right answer. I once got caught in a devastating grammar discussion about count/non-count nouns. Can "coffee" be a count noun? "Yes", I said, "I'd like two coffees to go, please." The response I got is unprintable. We both had solid arguments, both quoting respected linguistics and grammarians. Who had the right answer? For a prescriptive grammarian, she did. For a descriptive grammarian, I did.

Until we can unearth rules that truly reveal how our language operates, and that can truly serves as guides to language learning, it seems as if a grammar-based approach to acquiring languages is limited.

Implications

A. Error-free language

This means that perfection, especially at beginning levels of language instruction, is no longer the criterion. The language produced doesn't have to be perfectly produced. The language heard doesn't have to be perfectly or completely understood. It's acceptable to understand very little, and to even be a bit lost.

B. Grading

In traditional language classes, earning the highest grade means having the most right answers, as determined by the teacher/judge. But when we are in dialogic partnership with students working together to make meaning clear, ranking one student's performance against another's by counting up right answers no longer makes sense. If the level of correctness is no longer the criteron, then student evaluations, if any, would either be on a competency-based system, where students are expected to acquire certain communication skills or there would be no grades at all, as in a workshop environment. Any evaluation system would include and honor the student's self-evaluation.

6. Learners Learn Best When Language Is Presented in an Order That Reflects the Students' Need to Communicate Rather Than in a Strictly Ordered Grammar-Based Sequence.

Stephen Krashen in his book The Natural Approach describes the distinction between acquisition and learning: learning being the more tradition transmitting of formal knowledge, i.e. knowing and using the rules approach to language use as opposed to

> acquisition which refers to 'picking up a language', i.e. developing ability in a language by using it in natural, communicative situations. (Krashen and Terrell 1983, 18)

The study of language rules, i.e. classroom language learning, does not truly take communication needs into account when presenting language to students. Most textbooks and teachers rank language in a somewhat arbitrary continuum of simple to complex, and teach in that order. While strictly ordering the sequence of presentation might be a useful way to teach mathematics or physics, I don't agree that second language learners benefit from getting only the "simplest" structures first or from only hearing and producing a language in an artificial sequence.

The order we typically present a language may, in fact, have little to do with what the learner may need to know first, or for a long time. Foreign language for children often includes teaching colors, animals and numbers first, something I've also done in my French as a Foreign Language classes at elementary schools. But, when I lived in Spain with my children, I observed that they needed to understand and answer questions like "What is your name?" and "How old are you?" from their first days there. Their first word had nothing to do with colors, animals or numbers. It was "caremelo" (candy).

When considering meaning as a vehicle through which languages are acquired, we know that what is useless to the learner can require a great deal more concentration to learn then the complex, which, when needed to express that which is important to the speaker, can be acquired simply. Certainly a sentence, in question form, including a conjugated verb, is more complex to understand and respond to than a simple word, like "amarillo" (yellow), used in a game format. However, my children acquired those more complex structures after a few repetitions with no problem.

Despite the learner's abilities to handle structures, complex or simple, when they are needed, little attention is paid to the learner's communication needs when the teacher is locked into a textbook and its prescribed order. Far from encouraging students to go at their pace, it is an unwritten rule that students accept the imposed order, despite their explicit or implicit requests to move more quickly, to skip around, or, indeed, to go back.

I heard a colleague, in responding to a student's clarification question, say "Whoa, you're getting ahead of yourself!" I wondered how a person could possibly be ahead of himself. He was, as it turned out, ahead of the teacher's lesson plan. Yet the message he received was not only that his question was inopportune, but that he was somehow not where he was supposed to be in his learning. His request was denied. He had to wait three more weeks, like everyone else.

One of my students wrote in his dialogue journal:

> I don't feel to wrait about Felipe II, buildings and and other boring things. I want to wrait about the summer and about the holidays. But we have studing the past tense and is better wrait about Felipe II. When will we studie the futur? It is more interesting.

He was being a "good" student. We can see that he already has some control of the future tense in his entry, but he is resigned to waiting until the future tense is formally presented before using it for his communicative needs.

Implications

First Things First

If we agree that meaning is what drives language acquisition, it should be clear to the reader that a grammar-based syllabus, presented in discrete units without regard to expressing meaning will not alwyas support the students are in their learning and what they need to learn next to continue communicating. If a student needs the future tense to describe his summer plans, then we give him the future tense even though we weren't ready to present it. If the student is interested in reading about plant genetics, we let them chose Scientific American even if they've never read a word of English before. If they want to learn the words to a Michael Jackson song, then we give them the words, even if they will only understand a few. We don't need to make them wait until they've had English for 300 hours before they can do something interesting and/or useful with the language.

7. Learners Learn Best When They Are Exposed to the Language They Are Studying as It Is Used Authentically.

There is a wonderful story about a Japanese student who arrived in New York after having studied English for eleven years. The customs officer asked "Whachyername?". "What?", the bewildered student replied. "I said, whachyername?" The student, knowing that the man must be asking him a very simple question, began to cry. He felt that he had learned nothing.

In an effort to give students security by not setting them adrift in an ocean of foreign, indecipherable sounds, some language approaches so dissect and mummify the language that when students finally do hear it spoken naturally by a native speaker it is incomprehensible.

How can I communicate in a language when I don't know what it really sounds like? How can the learner acquire a language if they are not exposed to it in any recognizable form, but only fed it in discrete blocks?

Implications

One of my biggest jobs, especially in a country where the language I am teaching is not the lingua franca, is to expose my students to that language as it is spoken, whether they will understand everything or not. Krashen (Krashen and Terrell 1983, 33) speaks of the optimal input being i+1, or that which is just beyond what the students already know. I believe that i+2 is acceptable, even i+3, or well beyond the student's level, when a) the content provides cues to help comprehension, and b) the students can live with the discomfort of not understanding everything.

I brought a class of advanced beginners to a "tertulia" on woman's issues my school in Spain was holding for the English-speaking community at large. A tertulia is a large discussion group in which a topic is formally presented and then discussed. I knew the English would be well above their level, but I also knew through their dialogue journal entries that many of them, including a woman doctor and a woman agronomist, were very interested and affected by women's issues.

The class heard Americans speaking English with other Americans: real English and not just teacher talk. They heard Spaniards speaking English better than they thought their compatriots could. It overwhelmed them a little; it also stretched their imaginations.

The next day I asked them to write down three things they had learned from the tertulia. One student proclaimed that she had learned nothing. I said, "Fine. Then write that." She started with that, and ended up with seven items, more than twice the requested number. I read their lists to the rest of the class anonymously. They had picked up things that even I thought would have been too difficult. Most importantly, they impressed themselves. I'm glad that I didn't deprive them of a rich learning experience because "it was too hard for them."

Summary

The tertulia experience combines all the elements of what I consider to be a successful language experience. They were exposed to the language and not to a dissection. The students used their own learning skills to pick up whatever they could within a context that had meaning for them. I had no way of knowing or controlling what they would pick up from their language experience. I only trusted that they would, at their own level, acquire something. I did not count the number of new vocabulary words they gained, nor how many verb tenses they used to express themselves. They were not expected, nor did they expect to perfectly understand everything. It was uncomfortable for some, some of the time, but they never felt hopeless. They reported back anonymously on what they had learned, thus avoiding evaluation on my part. My only function had been to organize the outing, and to provide a framework for the next day's follow-up. They used the language in both writing and speaking to express their very heartfelt and unshakeable opinions on the role of women in Spanish society, with very little interference from the teacher. Their heated discussion the day after the tertulia was fluent, exciting and all in the target language.

An essential by-product of the experience was the confidence they gained in their abilities to function in the vastly uncharted ocean of the target language. These advanced beginners, with less than 170 hours of English under their belts, showed me and themselves that they were not just students of English, but speakers of English.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONNECTION: DIALOGUE JOURNALS

This chapter, in two parts, serves a dual purpose: one to describe dialogue journals and to show how they link my learning assumptions to their implementation; the other to serve as a connection between this section on theory and the following section on practice. To this end, I will step away from my own experiences and views and begin with a functional description of dialogue journals. In order to maintain the chronological exposition of my work with dialogue journals, the description begun here will evolve in the practices section of this paper, reflecting my deepening understanding over time of what dialogue journals are and how they work. Once a working definition of dialogue journals is established, I will return, in the second part of this chapter, to my experiences with dialogue journals, and what led me to choose them as a tool.

A Working Definition of Dialogue Journals

According to Joy Kreeft Peyton, in her article "Dialogue Journal Writing with Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) Students:"

> A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly -- daily, if

> possible, or at least two or three times a week -- over a period of one semester or an entire school year. Students may write as much as they choose on any topic and the teacher writes back regularly to each student (each time they write, if possible) -- often responding to the students' topics, but also introducing new topics; making comments and offering observations and opinions; requesting and giving clarification; asking questions and answering student questions. The teacher's role is as a participant with the student in an ongoing, written conversation, rather than as an evaluator who corrects or comments on the writing.(Peyton 1987, 1)

Dialogue journals were first used in Leslee Reed's sixth grade class in Los Angeles in 1979 as a way for students to discuss classroom-related topics in a personal way . Their use has now spread to nearly any classroom situation in which teacher/student communication is considered desirable: with all levels of ESL students, including those who are non-, or semi-literate in their first languages, with hearing-impaired or deaf students, and with mentally handicapped teenagers and adults. Besides being used in language arts and ESL classes, they are also used in content classes, such as social science, history, and math (Staton 1987, 1).

While dialogue journals are assigned by the teachers in a classroom setting, they differ significantly from other types of classroom writing assignments in a least six important ways. What follows is a description of these six differences:

1. The Journey Is the Destiny

The most significant difference is that dialogue journal writing has no end-product. It is simply a compilation of entries. Unlike other classroom writing, such as compositions, poetry, short stories, reports, theses, that are eventually polished and published, the journal entries stand as they are. Their use goes no further: they are not read outloud, integrated into lesson plans, or passed around.

2. No Corrections

The focus is clearly on communication, not on form. Errors that do not hinder understanding do not typically draw teacher comments. They are not graded or evaluated, returned or resubmited for approval.

3. No Lesson Plan

Along with not correcting errors in journal entries, there is no overt attempt on the teacher's part to teach language within the dialogue journal context. The students, trusted to figure out and pick up language, are free to use or not use what the teacher has modeled with her more fluent and accurate language. The student is not required to learn any specific language lessons from the teacher's entries, and the teacher is not responsible for any specific language acquisition on her student's part. Again, the dialogue journals are for communication purposes, and not to test language learning.

4. Learning Partners

This shift away from correcting and testing changes the teacher/student interaction to one that, as the term dialogue journal denotes, is dialogic. The teacher's sole mission is to simply engage in a dialogue. She makes a profound move from monologue to dialogue, allowing and often actively encouraging the students to share their experiences and views, while sharing her own. The interlocutors become people among people, learning about each other.

The teacher is a participant with the student. Students may disagree, argue, pose questions, share, and come to understand the teacher in a way not usually afforded in a non-dialogic relationship. The fact that the dialogue is in writing, and therefore not requiring immediate responses and providing a safe distance, is an added benefit to promoting this new kind of relationship.

5. Student-generated Topics

Many entries reflect topics initiated by and of interest to the student, making each dialogue journal was a unique collection of topics and discussions. In my experience, topics ranged from a student's new car to a death in the family to a simple weather report to the state of socialism in Spain. These topics, by virtue of being student-generated, make dialogue journals a high-interest commodity in the classroom, one which students have trouble putting down. As I have already stated, this high interest in hot topics drives language use well beyond the rather lifeless writing I have so often seen in classrooms.

6. Authentic Language Exchange

Most teachers tailor their language in the journals to match the needs of their students, as native speakers do naturally when speaking to non-native speakers. While the level and tone of the language found in dialogue journals is not the same as those found between native speakers, it remains communication-driven language within the context of an authentic exchange.

These six characteristics of dialogue journals add up to a significantly different language use experience within the classroom setting. If they sound repetitive, it is because these aspects nearly perfectly mirror my assumptions as outlined in the previous chapter. That my assumptions found such a true reflection was an exciting discovery for me.

My Introduction to Dialogue Journals

I discovered dialogue journals six years after they came into use, as a student in Patrick Moran's advanced French class at the School for International Training. I was a bit nervous about using dialogue journals when it was first proposed in the class. I have a Master's degree in French-African literature from the University of California at Los Angeles, and had written many a term paper in French before dialoguing with Mr.

Moran. Although my written French is fluent, it certainly is not perfectly accurate. The prospect of tormenting myself again over each verb ending, as I had always done, did not excite me.

The experience quickly took on a different emphasis, thankfully away from spelling. As I remember, we wrote about how our children interacted, about the class, about things French-African, and reincarnation. The dialogue was stimulating, amusing, and engaging. Although I still worked to make my entries as technically accurate as possible, I felt a shift away from the burden of accuracy towards the fun and challenge of expression. Instead of cringing at the thought of having to do a "writing assignment," I relished the chance to respond to his entries, and to continue the dialogue.

Bringing My Assumptions Into the Classroom

At the same time, I was searching for a way to implement my learning assumptions. Since I would never be free to completely throw out the grammar-based textbook syllabus, I needed a tool that could fit into the grammar-based syllabus teaching positions I would fill. This eliminated the use of the Natural Approach or Community Language Learning approach, which in many ways satisfy the conditions my assumptions mandate, but are whole systems I felt required total dedication.

It was important also that it not be a "trick" from every teacher's bag of tricks. It needed to systematically represent my beliefs. It needed to simultaneously provide me with experience in my non-traditional ways without being compromised by a grammar-based environment, while providing me with results that would challenge tradition.

To really challenge tradition, the tool would need to work with beginners. They are the ones who represent the quintessential empty vessels so sought after by advocates of the banking system. Because beginners know nothing, says the common wisdom, we can fill them as we wish.

I wanted to see if, by granting their natural learning powers putting meaning before accuracy, and basically staying out of their way, these beginners could actually produce comprehensible and complex language.

But, were dialogue journals a suitable testing ground for use with beginners? Dialoguing with a student who already has a Master's degree in the language, as was my case with Patrick Moran, is different than dialoguing with someone who has never used the target language before. In my role on the student side of the dialogue, I brought with me a background of exposure to countless grammar presentations, tests, and several years of language use in French-speaking countries. My challenge was rather the dialogue relationship itself: what topic to choose, what tone to take, how to respond. A beginner, on the other hand, has to work through the above, and with the more obvious challenge of an extremely limited language base. Could it work?

I only hesitated for a few moments: this was just the medium and just the target group needed to put my assumptions to the test. I experimented with dialogue journals in a second level French class I taught briefly at Brattleboro Union High School in January 1987. The students' ages ranged from thirteen to seventeen. The students worked in pairs during the first five minutes of class to write me a note in French. I took the notes home, eight in all, and responded. I returned them the next day, and gave the students five minutes again to answer. It was a quick way to establish rapport with the class, and it was fun. Moreover, the students got a rare opportunity to communicate directly and meaningfully with a near-native speaker on the topic of their choice, without being graded. Those five minutes became a significant time for them to be creative, excited and motivated.

This confirmed my commitment to dialogue journals. The following summer, I began working with it in earnest. What follows is a description of who I worked with, and what kind of educational systems we worked together in.

Background

I worked with dialogue journals with two groups of International Students of English (ISE) based at the Experiment in International Living in Brattleboro, Vermont in the summers of 1987 and 1988, as well as several groups of Spanish students at the American Language Program of the Hispanic-North American Cultural Association (ACHNA) in Madrid, Spain during the 1987-88 academic year.

The first group I worked with in July 1987 shall be referred to hereafter as the "raw beginners," having nearly all scored below ten on the one-hundred-point Michigan Test.

There were twelve students in all: three from Italy, three from Columbia, and one each from Ecuador, Turkey, France, Canada, Spain and Argentina. Their ages ranged from sixteen to thirty-eight, most in their late teens and early twenties. They were learning English to improve their professional or academic standing. They were all very cosmopolitan, well-educated, well-traveled, wealthy, and good-humored.

We were together for one month, for five hours a day, five days a week. At the end of the month, they took the Michigan Test again to quantify their progress, and to be placed in future classes.

The teachers were given guidelines on grammar points and functions to present, but the curriculum was mine to design as I wished.

During the 1987-88 academic year, I worked at ACHNA in Madrid. The differences between ISE and ACHNA were overwhelming.

At ACHNA, there were approximately 3000 students in attendance, and seventy teachers, compared to 100 students at ISE, with eight teachers. ACHNA had sixteen levels of classes compared to eight at ISE. The most advanced at ACHNA ranking with the advanced intermediates at ISE.

The classes at ACHNA ran in five week cycles, five days a week, one hour a day. Teachers were assigned to four or five groups in ten-week blocks, with an exam administered every five weeks. The exam was written by ACHNA teachers specifically for each level of the very structured curriculum, and covered specific items the students were expected to have learned. I had very little to say about curriculum design, except in choosing ways to present the requisite structures and functions.

The five-week or twenty-five hour point was also an entry point for new students who would have tested into the level. This gave me little time for community-building before the student population shifted.

I used dialogue journals with two groups of level three/four, one seven/eight group, and two level twelves. These classes had between fourteen and eighteen students, ranging in age from fifteen to late fifties. They were all Spanish, although not all were from Madrid. Like my ISE students, they were well-traveled, well-educated and cosmopolitan.

The second ISE group I taught the following summer was the most advanced of my groups, scoring in the 70-80 range of the Michigan test. They were thirteen in number; six from Japan, and one each from Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Turkey, Switzerland, and Taiwan. They also represented a range of ages and interests, but were all on the same socio-economic level.

The contrasts between the different groups are striking: English as a Second language versus English as a Foreign language, multicultural classes opposed to monocultural classes, a large school in a European capital with a highly structured curriculum compared to a small, residential school in rural New England with no set curriculum, raw beginners to U.S. university students. And yet, as I describe, the dialogue journal was able to serve as a communication medium for all these levels and types of teaching environments.

PART TWO: IN THE TRENCHES: PRACTICE

CHAPTER ONE

THE GROUND RULES: GETTING STARTED

Ideally, before students and teachers engage in the dialogue journal process, ground rules should be set up. While I was fairly clear on the theory behind dialogue journals and how they could help implement my assumptions, finding a workable system of providing regular, consistent dialoguing required a bit of experimentation. Questions of how often should students write, should they write in the classroom or at home, where in the lesson plan should the writing time be inserted, how much of an explanation of the dialogue journal process should I give, what their first entry should look like took some time and thinking to be resolved. What follows in this chapter is an account of how I came to set up a framework that worked for me, presented element by element.

How Often

Many writers say that the secret to writing is to write. The more students write, the better writers they will become. For my raw beginners at the Experiment which met five hours a day, five days a week, I had the students write every day, and I responded every night. On a good night, with no interruptions, when responses flowed out of my pen, I make ten journal entries in a little over an hour.

The results were phenomenal. I started by giving them fifteen minutes of writing time in class. I thought more would be too much. But when I gave them their two-minute warnings, they always protested. Each day they wrote, it seemed that they wanted to write more. Many of them clearly looked forward to getting my response, and to more writing time. Oscar, from Columbia, usually exhausted by intensive partying the night before, would prop his chair back against the wall, creating a barrier, and, with a satisfied look, begin writing. We finally stretched the time from fifteen minutes a day to forty-five, time they were all really writing and wanting to write. Had there not been this day-by-day opportunity for them to slowly build their confidence and interest, I believe that their progress would have been much slower.

But responding night after night, in addition to preparing for the next day and correcting the usual grammar exercises, was exhausting. By the time I got to Madrid, I knew that responding every day was beyond my limits. And yet I was keenly aware, through my experience with the raw beginners, that writing demands a flow. It's hard to start a dialogue, with all its delicate negotiations, and have to put it down. It also takes a lot of energy to start it up again.

My students in Madrid demanded consistency. They liked knowing when they would be corresponding with me again. They "rehearsed" their entries in their heads before coming to class on their writing days and were disappointed if I had forgotten the journals at home. They also looked forward to my responses. When I was too snowed under to respond, I would have them continue their previous entries, sometimes three days running. This way, I reasoned, at least they would be writing. This wasn't popular. When this happened, I would get such responses as:

> I don't like to write letter if any people don't answer me.
> Juan, level three, Madrid

or, more directly,

> Listen, Janet, if you don't answer me I will tell you nothing more because this can get in a monologue and this is very bored.
> Alicia, level four, Madrid

These were clear messages to me. If I was to participate in a dialogue, I needed to be present in a consistent way. The key is to make this labor-intensive medium manageable. When it wasn't manageable for me, the process deteriorated. And since writing everyday, while optimal for students, was unmanageable for me, I had to find a middle ground. I needed to find a way to participate in the dialogue without becoming exhausted and overwhelmed, while providing students with regular and consistent writing time.

I also had the added constraints at ACHNA of following a specific syllabus that the students would be tested on. While I had seen that beginners were capable of writing for forty-five minute stretches, I was not comfortable devoting more than ten minutes per class on writing for fear of not fulfilling my obligation to cover the required material.

The easiest decision was narrowing down the number of journals I could respond to: I could not do dialogue journals for all five classes. No one has the time or energy to respond to 100 journals. I chose one or two classes to work with; those classes with more challenging personalities, preferably in the the beginning groups.

My classes in Madrid were one full hour, five days a week. After a few weeks of intensive research, I developed a plan. The students wrote for ten minutes in class four times a week: on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. On Tuesdays and Fridays, they could continue what they had started the day before, or write about something different, as they wished. Wednesday was a free day for them. This gave me Tuesday and Wednesday evenings to respond, as well as the weekend. In sum, I wrote two responses to their four.

This became the rhythm of response I used for that nine-month period. It worked well. Although ten minutes is a relatively short period, the writing times occurred frequently and regularly, allowing the students, as I show in the next chapter, to get involved in the dialogue journal in a fairly short time.

They used their second ten minutes to develop a theme, to recount a complete story, or to change to a completely new topic. This gave me a chance to respond to a more complete unit of thought on their part and to better understand what they were trying to express.

By cutting my responses from five per week to two, I managed to fulfill my response commitment, usually without fail. And, the in-class writing time totalled 13% of their total class time, making only the slightest dent, time wise, in the curriculum. Thus, all needs were accommodated, and the dialogue journal process could proceed smoothly.

Getting back to Brattleboro the following summer, I planned to use the Madrid plan with my advanced intensive class: four days of writing, to two days of teacher responses. The only change would be that we could again extend the time frame, as I had done with the raw beginners. To my surprise, these very advanced students felt that more than twenty minutes of writing at a time was excessive. Because writing is traditionally given as homework, more than twenty minutes of it in the classroom was perceived as "wasteful." I could have chosen to push their limits further, but I was satisfied with what they were producing in their twenty minutes.

The actual time allotted to dialogue journal writing varied in my experiences from ten minutes to forty-five minutes. I found that this time variation did not affect the success of the process. Its success, rather, depended most on the frequency and consistency of the writing sessions.

I learned that, as with regular exercise, writing five times one week, and none the next was detrimental to the dialogue journal process. Less than three times a week for beginners seemed to break down the process: they needed more continuity. It was too easy to lose their momentum.

Giving students time for dialogue writing at odd, unpredictable moments during class time, responding regularly for two weeks, and then shelving dialogue journals for a few weeks, to start again, making a strong commitment at the beginning of the term, and fading out as finals draw near to plug in extra grammar exercises (I'm guilty of all) are death to the dialogue journal process.

When

I had established a frequent and predictable rhythm of dialogue journal writing before establishing a regular time within each class session in which to write. Learning to set a specific time aside on a regular basis was particularly problematic for me. I am a chronic overplanner. Any one of my lesson plans for any given day could easily last for two days. When I put off writing time until my lesson plan for the day had been completely presented, there was little or no time left for the dialogue journal And there went consistency, predictability, and security out the door. The problem here was that the dialogue journal was not integrated into my program. I had, without realizing it, given it the status of an optional supplementary activity, and not the key representative of my learning assumptions.

Even when I summoned up the strength to stop my lesson plan the allotted number of minutes before the end of class, and dedicate the last part of the class to the dialogue journal, the results were not pleasing. I found that students had trouble stopping abruptly when the bell rang. Many didn't want to stop writing. They felt that they could take a few more minutes since the class was over anyway. This wreaks havoc on the poor teacher who only has five minutes to collect her materials and journals, clear out the students, lock the door, return the key to the teachers' room, and get to another classroom herself.

Some students would put off actually writing until the last minute, and then, like Mirabel from Madrid, level five, cheerfully write:

> I can't tell you more because the bell rang. What a pity! Tomorrow I'll tell you about more interesting news. OK?

Starting the class with dialogue journals was not successful either. Some students, especially in Spain, were consistently late to class, thus missing most or all of the dialogue journal writing time. Some seemed to feel that it was acceptable to miss dialogue journal writing time, since it was not real school work, giving them license to be late. But I wanted a situation in which the students would be writing consistently to give the dialogue journal process a chance to develop. Dialoguing at the beginning of class just didn't work.

I finally worked out an effective system. The optimal plan was to start the class with a warm-up activity, which allowed for stragglers to interrupt without disruption. After this, I gave them time for journal writing. I didn't have to tear myself away from my lesson plan, which began after their ten minutes of writing, and I wasn't late to my next class. In this way, the routine was established and it became a consistent and predictable part of my classes.

In Class vs. Outside Class Writing

Closely linked to issues of how much time should be spent on dialogue journals is the question of location of the writing sessions. If the students write in their journals as a take-home assignment, how long they spend on reading and responding is completely dependent on how much time they are willing to take.

Not being limited by time, they have more opportunity to use reference books. For those who need silence to compose, writing outside the classroom can give the students more control over eliminating distractions. This also frees class time for other language activities, especially oral communication.

The benefits sound convincing. But there are some important drawbacks to assigning dialogue journals as homework that, in my experience, outweigh those benefits. The first drawback has to do with solitary writing. Facing a blank page alone, especially for beginners, is sometimes a daunting experience. I have found a number of students either spend an inordinate amount of time writing the perfect entry or are so overwhelmed that they don't write at all.

In the former case, the focus on perfect grammar, spelling, punctuation and style often override the topic. Rather than using writing to express their ideas, they tailor their writing and their ideas to fit their limited syntax. Form becomes the main goal, thus defeating the purpose of dialogue journal writing.

In the latter situation, some students spent less time on dialogue journals outside their classrooms than they did in the classroom. I've seen some dialoguers scribbling their response as I was unlocking the classroom door. Others would slap their hands to their hands, saying "Oh, I forgot to bring my dialogue journal today." The sparseness and the inconsistent frequency of their entries work counter to the dialogue journal process.

Secondly, I don't feel that dictionaries and grammar books are very useful tools for beginning students to use on their own. My students created many a hilarious sentence from words found in a dictionary, which they insisted were right because the dictionary is always right. What they were missing is the content schema that many foreign language dictionaries assume that their readers already have. If you look up "gato" and find five words in English, you need to know something about English to choose the most appropriate translation. A dictionary is only useful if you already understand the language. Otherwise, it can serve to give the student a false sense of confidence and a truly false sounding second language.

The third disadvantage of writing outside the classroom may seem contradictory to my touchstone assumption of trusting the students and their natural intelligence. As a homework assignment, dialogue journals become strictly a voluntary activity. I have no control over their participation. By not giving students the choice of writing in their own environment, using the time they need, be it long or short, using reference books as they see fit, and, indeed, whether they even want to participate in a teacher/student dialogue, was I not imposing my will, as teacher, on the class?

My only response is affirmative: I was imposing my will. I was not acting as a dialogue partner, but as a teacher who was going to use the dialogue journal experience as the basis of a master's thesis. I wanted as many participants as possible in order to have the broadest possible sampling. I was not even aware of this factoring into my decision-making until the motives behind my need to control students' writing time by not allowing them to write at home were challenged by my thesis advisor.

So, for these reasons, conscious and subconscious, I elected to have the students use class time for dialogue journal writing. I have been pleased with the results. Writing in a group setting rather than writing alone seemed to inspire, encourage, or just plain shame the students into writing by the example of the rest of the group all industriously writing away. The time limit had an added benefit. "Write about anything you want for ten minutes" is much more doable than "Write about anything you want for as long as you want". This time restriction on my part took the pressure off my students to create a masterpiece for each entry.

Watching others, including their teacher, struggle, hesitate, sigh, write furiously, then suddenly stop, asking and answering questions of others in the process allowed us all to have a less glorified and more realistic view of what writing is. The pressure on the students eventually wore off and they gained faith in their ability to write on their own.

My students were free to bring in dictionaries, although they all knew of my anti-dictionary stance. Some chose to, and some took their chances without. Pilar, level seven in Madrid, was the only student who felt she needed a dictionary to communicate better. She wrote:

> I don't understand "bullfights" but when I go home tonight I'm looking for the meaning in the dictionary.

After she looked it up, we were able to continue that line of discussion. Rather than consulting reference books, most students would ask me or their neighbors for help. This seemed appropriate in an environment where it was acceptable for students to write what they are able to and were not penalized for mistakes. I didn't need to see their most perfect version.

The raw beginners at the Experiment turned their writing time into a very unofficial writers' workshop. I thought they would all work quietly, listening to nice classical or new age music. Instead, they were throwing their small, pocket-size dictionaries back and forth, asking each other for words, asking me to clarify what I wrote (my handwriting especially), and occasionally doing other things (homework, reading). I had always felt that a quiet place was essential for writing, but perhaps because those students were nearly all from polychronic cultures, they liked the music and the talking. And they wrote well.

This was my only really loud class. Perhaps this was their way of getting support since they had so little language. My other classes, all more advanced, were able to maintain a quiet environment. If the silence was violated, students were sure to report to me their displeasure via their dialogue journal. Even though these other groups were quieter,the workshop atmosphere still persisted for we all helped each other.

A final benefit of in-class writing is that the teacher is always in possession of the journal notebooks. This cuts down on students forgetting to bring their notebooks back, and helps maintain the consistency of the entries. In this way, the teacher is literally controlling the framework while the students control the content.

The question of where the dialogue journal writing should take place is a difficult one, with supporters on both sides. The choice to give students, especially beginners, a writing environment in which they are supported by the presence of their classmates and teacher, and where the task of writing is placed within realistic time boundaries, also takes away some of their own choices. While never forced to participate in the writing, they are forced to work in an environment that might not accommodate their own learning strategies. On the other hand, writing outside of the classroom leaves the writing time and strategies entirely in their hands. But it does not provide very much support, nor guarantee consistency. My own solution to this dilemma is to choose the more supportive, consistent route to insure the life of the dialogue journal process in my classrooms.

First Steps

On the first day of class, I asked students to provide notebooks for their dialogue journals. I found that bringing in a sample notebook helped. I usually requested that they bring them to the second class. Other teachers actually bought the notebooks themselves, and brought them to the classroom. I don't think that this is necessary for it puts the teacher, once again, in the role of provider. The students need to own their dialogue journals.

Faced with a blank page on the second day, what should they do? My preference was to give as few guidelines as possible. I found student-generated questions to be the best way to initiate the process. This gave me a sense of where the students were, in terms of interest areas and communicative competency.

My favorite guideline, which evolved throughout the year was: BE BOLD. This signaled to them that this was a place beyond the usual teacher/learner relationship and set the tone for dialoguing. It also allowed me to be bold in my responses.

At the Experiment, the students, both a very beginning class and a very advanced class had no problem with "ask me a question; be bold" as a complete set of instructions. However, I found my students in Spain to be very uncomfortable with such non-specific instructions. In response, I structured things a bit more for them.

One way I did this was to draw upon specific course content. In one class in Madrid, we were working with wish/hope structures in the grammar portion of the class. I had asked them to brainstorm sentences using those structures, and then to underline two that were the most important to them. I used those sentences as springboards to a dialogue. Another way was to ask certain kinds of questions. In the lower level classes, I would ask them to "tell me something about Spain and/or tell me something about you and ask me a question."

In this way, the students were given a range of choices within a framework. Without ever assigning a topic, I was able to give them some perimeters. They seemed more comfortable with that than with my more open-ended instructions.

Ready, Steady, Go!

Our dialogues began. I sat back in my chair and watched them write with baited breath. I was barely being able to wait to read their entries, wondering already how to respond. I was in for a surprise.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STUDENT'S SIDE OF THE DIALOGUE

From the moment I could talk
I was ordered to listen.
There's a way and I know
And I have to go away.

Cat Stevens, "Father and Son"

So, here I was on the second day of class. Most students had their brand-new dialogue journal notebooks in hand, pen poised, waiting for the topic to be assigned. I gave them minimal instructions. Some quietly started writing. But some groaned, fidgeted, and, in Madrid, asked each other in Spanish what I had said. They became uncomfortable, defiant, suspicious and even hostile. I was floored.

In this chapter, I will show some areas that were most challenging for students in their introduction to dialogue journals and some ways in which I responded to facilitate the transition to a smoother give-and-take dialogue.

Expecting Resistance

Giving students an opportunity to be authentic, to communicate meaningfully with the new language they were learning seemed like such a liberating, empowering concept and practice. How could it fail to be immediately accepted and even embraced? Weren't these people teeming with themes and ideas so long unexpressed that they would flood the pages? How little I understood.

Many of my students--bank presidents, hospital administrators, entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, athletes, even writers--expected to receive information, ideas, sentences, words. The classroom was a place for them to be passive. They sat slumped down in their desks, their arms folded across their chests, and seemed to be saying "Teach me, expert".

It never occurred to me that many of them were comfortable in their passivity. It never occurred to me that the energy they required to generate their own topics exceeded their daily energy budget. I never counted on them being so devoted to the banking system.

Instead of asking for the traditional receiving of language and reproducing it within a test format, I was asking them to produce, with whatever L_2 they could pull together, whole paragraphs, sometimes pages of written communication with no overt corrective feedback on my part. I was asking them to be excited and enthusiastic about this radical change in their classroom, and I was surprised at their resistance.

I'm more surprised now, looking back, at my surprise. Some resistance is normal and healthy when reacting to the unknown. Dialogue journals were unknown. It was hard for them to trust that this very new idea, so opposed in its implementation to what the students were used to doing, would actually produce a meaningful communication experience. Since the dialogue journals reflected my own assumptions so closely, and therefore seemed so natural to me, I did not immediately see how potentially threatening they could have appeared to students whose education career was based on and validated by the banking system. I quite simply did not understand the enormity of what I was asking. This was truly my blindspot.

What saved me was my rather blind and zealous faith in the intrinsic value of the dialogue journal process. I believed that it had value whether its value was perceived by the student or not. Once into the process, they would come to value it too. It was just a question of patience. Having faith in dialogue journals, then, and trusting the student's innate intelligence was vital.

Allowing student resistance without backing down or diluting the dialogue journal process enabled me to see what specific parts seemed especially threatening and at what points in the process the students were most threatened. After a while, my blind faith was augmented by experience. I could predict some very basic stages in the process.

Hey, What Is This?

"Hey, what is this?" is the exclamation of surprise of someone facing a situation that is substantially different than what she expected it to be. It can be likened to the way I feel whenever my husband makes my favorite dish, but adds a new spice. The new spice might be a worthy innovation, but I want my old favorite. And, given no choice in the matter of whether a new spice will be added or not, I at least want a warning. I want to be prepared.

I did not prepare my students for their new dialogue journal experience. I wanted the dialogue journal to be as close to an authentic acquisition experience as possible. In other words, I wanted them to figure everything out by themselves: the objective, the rules, the expectations, the mode of evaluation. I reasoned that in "real life", the interlocutor isn't asked to explain the rules, goals, or method of evaluation before beginning a conversation. These factors form the substance of the on-going dialogue negotiations. I feared that any explanations would turn the dialogue journal into just another artificial exercise.

In addition, I didn't want to tell the students how to do something that, once the framework was in place, they would be largely responsible for shaping. To be true to the underlying dialogue journal principles, the dialogue journal had to be their own experience. Since none of my students had any previous experience with the dialogue journal, I wanted them to be free of any teacher expectations on form or content. I also felt that analyzing the journals with the students would turn the focus away from communication and closer to being another written grammar exercise.

Allowing students to discover is much more exciting than feeding them information. When Barbara, an ISE participant from Milan wrote:

> At first I was surprised, but after the first week I understand that it's better to write everything and not only a few correct words.

I was thrilled. She got the essence of the dialogue journal process experientially, by doing it and not talking about it. Her sense of it through her experience is more accurate than the most eloquent and well-researched explanation I could have given her. This is my ideal scenario. I was to find that Barbara was exceptional in her ability to suspend belief and see what happens.

When their entries were returned uncorrected, with my answer eliciting more information from them, they were all, without exception, surprised.

As Alex, another raw beginner from Milan wrote,

> The first time I was surprised because I believe what I made some mistake.

I found that students who had come to The Experiment seemed much more willing and open to perform in non-traditional ways. Perhaps this was because they had left their own countries and therefore their own traditions behind, or at least suspended. They didn't expect things to be done the way they had been back home, and they required fewer guidelines. With them, the dialogue journal simply unfolded, in a natural, resistance free manner.

But I wasn't so lucky at ACHNA with students taking classes in their own country with American teachers who had adapted to a more European system of teaching. Most students expected the dialogue journal to be like any other writing assignment. I will admit to some similarities. The dialogue journal, like other written work, occurs in the classroom, it is assigned by the teacher, the situation has a bit of that classroom artificiality in that they are writing to someone who is sitting in front of them, and they hand their writing over to the teacher, who returns it to them. These students were honestly confused and sometimes resistant. They wanted rationalizations and justifications, as well as explanations.

What to do? Do I explain the differences between a dialogue journal and other writing exercises, or let them see for themselves?

My solution at the time, in a perhaps defective application of my cornerstone assumptions that learners learn best when granted their own natural powers of learning, was to never gave them more than a few explanations, like "This is a written conversation between you and me. It will never be graded. Write whatever you want to write about."

While I didn't like being in a position to insist on an activity that the students don't understand and couldn't justify, I found that my persistence was rewarded. One class always groaned as I passed out the dialogue journals for them to read and respond to, and that same class always groaned and demanded "five more minutes, please!" when I announced "time's up." I finally asked them why they did that. They laughed, surprised at their own pattern. Although it was never easy for some of them to slip out of the banking system mode of receiving passively, and to produce something, albeit imperfectly, the excitement of the dialogue would capture them, making it just as difficult to stop. The more they wrote, the more invested they became, and after a while, most eventually generated their own justifications and understanding of the dialogue journal process.

In summary, introducing dialogue journals to a class is a delicate operation. Most students willingly buy a separate notebook without requiring much explanation. But some require more than "write me a question and be bold" to start off the dialogue process. Determining the appropriate amount of explaining was difficult.

It would be impossible to explain to a student who had only participated in an educational system that required her passive non-participation what a dialogue between teachers and students can be. A learning partnership cannot be taught, especially not by one of the learning partners. How, then, can the dialogue journal process be understood? To quote R. Buckminister Fuller from his Synergetics:

> In scenarios, you have to have a pretty long sequence run in order to gain any clue at all as to what is going on. (Fuller 1975, 87)

The scenario of a dialogue journal partnership, like other scenarios, simply require time and experience to be understandable. In this way, dialogue journals are profoundly experiential.

But they are not totally unexplainable. Looking back, I'm not sure it was useful to insist on a pure acquisition strategy. I did not consider their very real need for security and trust. Explaining that the dialogue journal would serve as a safe place for language use might have gone a long way in reducing their initial resistance, or at least their confusion.

"Well, Janet, I'm not Cervantes"

Proposing, as I have done in my assumptions, that the main objective in the classroom is producing fluent language that clearly and accurately expresses their meaning, rather than emphasizing error-free but meaningless, or minimally meaningful language created another attitudinal obstacle for students to overcome. How could they write to their teacher if their writing was so far from perfect?

The mythical native speaker, an ideal most L_2 learners will probably never attain, haunts the language classroom. I was at one time rated 4^+ on the Foreign Service Institute 0-5 scale in French, but no matter what I did, it was never native. It is a performance objective that, as my high school students of French at the Purnell School for Girls told me, makes students believe that their language teachers try to make them look stupid. I tried to do away with this ultimately frustrating language classroom definition for success. My goal was not that students sound, write and think like the native speaker but that they be able to communicate with fluency with a native speaker.

Pablo in level three (or 50 hours of English) in Madrid was very excited about going beyond the sentential level. He wrote in his first entry:

> Madrid: is very difficult to write a little information of Madrid. It's a big city with everything in his streets.
> There are so many buildings and monuments.
> But I have many questions for you.
> Where are from?
> What do you do?
> It's my first "redaccion" [composition] in English.
> It's very little, isn't it?

My reaction was that after 50 hours of English, this should have been just one of many "redacciones". I am struck by his use of the word "little." Certainly in his native Spanish he could have written a thesis on the buildings and monuments of Madrid. So, in this way, his composition was indeed little. My role, as his dialogue partner, was to help him feel comfortable with his own level of communication, little or not, so that the conversation could continue. Santiago, also level three in Madrid, started out his dialogue journal with the belief that he could not continue: :

> I don't know tell you.
> It's very difficult for me traslate words of Spanish to English. In the last sentence I have to look the Dictionary. It's very difficult for me to traslate one complete sentence of Spanish to English without look the dictionary. I'm bored about this journal because my English is very,very, bad and I don't arrive to explain you any clear idea.

He expressed his frustration clearly. One can see that he is indeed translating. One can easily sense the effort his sentence took, and how frustrated he is. The irony, of course, is that while his message is very clear, the content of his message is that he feels he isn't writing well or clearly.

When I acknowledged his discomfort in my next response, and asked him to tell me what things were important to him. In his following entry, he wrote about friends and work. He was so into his topic, that he apparently didn't even read my response, but started his next entry with:

"the last day I forged say something..."

Santiago found a way to express his struggle. Guiding him beyond it, once he expressed it, was a matter of matching his fear with faith, not with an impossible production criteria.

Angel, one of Santiago's classmates, was having trouble finding a focus. He seemed to need a framework, so I provided him with one.

> Janet: Ok - what makes Madrid unique and surprising? For example:
> 1)_______________
> 2)_______________
> 3)_______________
>
> Angel: Madrid city is surprising for:
> -open twenty-four hours day
> -there's many hours of sun
> -Madrid's people is beautiful
> Let's go talk of N.Y.

And off he went, writing about New York and Los Angeles.

The dialogue journal becomes a safe place for the students to practice communicating with a fluent and accurate speaker of their target language in a natural way. Writing shields the learner from the face-to-face humiliations that can occur in conversation with a native speaker. The student never sees the teacher's amusement or confusion before she writes a straight response. And the student has another safety feature that that speech lacks: crossing out and starting again.

By taking the emphasis off performance and putting it on the dialogue itself, that is, on the content and the relationship, students come to accept their language level. They don't beat themselves up for not being Cervantes. Freed of that often unspoken and unattainable standard, their writing flows.

No Response

The hardest reaction to counter is the freeze, where students refuse to write, or only write that they have nothing to write. Very few students fit into this category. There seem to be two reasons for the freeze. The first corresponds to Krashen's idea of the "silent period" in which the learner is assimilating the language (Krashen and Terrell 1983). Production naturally follows this period, when the student, like a child learning her first language, is ready. A student's non-response may be entirely appropriate for their point in learning the language.

Part of granting my dialogue partners their own natural learning abilities is to respect this non-response and not to force production. I have found that by faithfully maintaining my end of the dialogue, by giving them alternative ways of responding, such as providing yes/no questions, frameworks, and drawings, and by being patient, the student will eventually begin to participate in the dialogue.

A second reason may have nothing to do with their being in a silent period. Some students have no belief that they can write anything of value. Their writing is always bad in their own eyes, whether it is or not to others. This is an attitude that I try to change. In the early stages of the dialogue journal process, I have had classes do free writing with the following instructions from Peter Elbow's book Writing without Teachers:

> Write for ten minutes. Don't stop for anything! Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, use a squiggle or write "I can't think of it". Write about whatever is on your mind. Or write "I don't know what to say, why are we doing this" as many times as you want, or repeat the last word you wrote over and over. Never stop writing for ten minutes. (Elbow 1973, 3)

I ask them break into small groups and share their writing. In one class, I spent my ten minutes writing in my beginning Spanish while the students were writing in their more advanced English, and shared. Sharing my free writing really broke the ice because it 1) broke down the mystique of the perfect teacher,and 2) provided a model for believing that one's own work is of value, at whatever level. They really get the idea that whatever they wrote was acceptable.

Choosing The Right Topic

Along with worrying about, as another student said it, their English being "very, very bad," some students seem to worry, understandably, about pleasing the teacher with the right topic. Their concern is understandable because of the implicit rules we all follow that demand that we please authority figures.

One student, Antonio, level four in Madrid, seemed to understand very early on that finding that one right topic did not apply in my classroom and especially in the dialogue journal. After a few stabs at a topic, he wrote:

> I'm a little tired about this conversation related to Madrid. It's a conversation for tourists. I believe that we can think together for find a subject more interesting.

His response contains key elements to successful dialogue writing. He doesn't seem to be concerned about his teacher's wrath or displeasure at his wanting to change the topic. He is taking responsibility for not continuing a topic that bores him. "I believe that we can think together" shows that he sees us as being in this process together as partners. He suggested, and I agreed, to discuss the upcoming U.S. presidential elections. But, I found out later by running into him at the neighborhood camera store that he was an amateur photographer and that was his hot issue. However, he never wrote about it.

Another student, Luis from Madrid, in level seven, an army lieutenant, felt compelled to deal with the please-the-teacher rules explicitly in his first dialogue journal entry:

> My name is Luis. I'm a pupil of this class. In this moment, I'm writing several lines because my teacher has ordered me to do it. I don't know what kind of thinks she wants I write, my life, her life, another's life. I think my life is kind of boring, and I don't know her life, and I think the another's life don't interest us (nor she neither me) and then I'm going to write how is doing a pair of fried egg.

And he did, in great detail. Not knowing what to write, he went the absurdist route and wrote about something he could say was only a joke if he was "wrong" in his choice. In his following entries he expounded on Spanish painting, literature, social mores until we finally found a subject that meant something to him. (see page 102-103)

Some students are less bold. Amparo, also level seven, wrote:

> It's difficult because I don't know what I can speak about. I'm thinking that I'd like to ask you about all your travels.

She clearly is not ready to commit directly to the topic of travelling. She is testing the waters. My response was to get her to specify what part of my travels was she interested in. In this way, we worked together, gingerly, finding a topic.

Other students were not as willing to explore topics. Some students are genuinely suspicious and confused when asked to use their own judgement on a topic choice. They don't want to risk a "wrong" topic, even when I insisted that any topic was fine with me. "What do you really want me to write about?" was the most typical response.

Asking students to start their dialogue journals with questions for me, as I've mentioned in the Ground Rules chapter, was a less risky way to have them introduce a topic then saying "write about anything". Samples of their first day questions were:

Do you know Toledo?
Do you like Spanish food?
Do you like Spain?
How do you like to live in Spain?
What do you think about Spain?
Do you like the Spanish people?
How are you doing?
What do you like?
Where are live you?
Do you like the movies?
What about speak about hobbies?

None of these are dynamic, sparkling conversation starters. But, as mundane and typical as these questions were, and as slow as the dialogues were to take off, these questions show, as with Amparo, a very tentative exploration into who I am as their dialogue partner. Do I like their country? Do I like them? Do I like their food? What do I really know about them? Am I an "ugly American" or a hispanophile, or someone in between? While starting out with a question like "What topics do you most often discuss with your friends?" or "What is important to you?" could have led some students to a hot topic sooner than the above questions did, maybe this more tentative topic initiation in fact more appropriate.

"My Life Is Boring"

"Me, myself and I" are unacceptable words in most classroom writing where students are asked to write in the third person on topics that may or may not relate to them. This depersonalization can spill over in dialogue journals. It took many of my students a long time to believe that their own lives can be interesting and viable topics.

As one student wrote:

> Hi Janet! I don't know what to tell you. My life is very simple.
>
> Maria Jose

When Maria Jose believed that she could write whatever she wanted to write in the classroom for her teacher to read, she opened up and shared the adventures and tragedies of her "simple" life. Far from being simple, she was the wife of a wealthy businessman and mother of two young children. We wrote about the joys and struggles of marriage and family, of our travels, of deaths in our families, of our dreams and our pressures. It was a dialogue that held me spellbound.

'Splain me

Possibly the most difficult thing the students were required to produce in order for the dialogue to work was explanations, something they had almost never had to do before in a language class. All of my journal examples come from people from cultures other than my own. Because I did not always understand their cultures or backgrounds, I was putting them in a position of having to explain things because, otherwise, I didn't get it. They were trying to explain things that had never needed explaining to compatriots. Simple things like: why does the Spanish tobacco industry produce and sell postage stamps to the Post Office? As an outsider in Spain, I couldn't make sense of it. My students had never given it a second thought. How to explain these things to an uncomprehending foreigner?

Because some students were unaware that such explanations were even necessary, they could not understand my need to explore certain aspects of their culture. The following dialogue with Antonio, level seven from Madrid, shows this:

Janet: I would like to know about how Spanish people live.
Antonio: You should try to speak to Spanish people in order to get more information about our live, but I think it's not too different.
Janet: Well, Antonio, aren't you a Spanish person? I'm asking you. Ok, I have a question. What time do you eat dinner? Why?
Antonio: I'm a Spanish person, if I wasn't I should not be here. I don't understand your question about dinner.
Janet: My question is: what time do you eat dinner, and why do you eat dinner at that time?
Antonio: I can't answered to you about my time to eat dinner, I haven't time.
Janet: Well, now you can finally tell me what time you usually have dinner!!
Antonio: I really don't understand your question. Why do you want know the time that I usually have dinner? Well, I usually have dinner at 11. I really am hungry at this time.

Although we understood each other perfectly on a language level, clearly my line of questioning was incomprehensible to him. Antonio believed that Americans and Spaniards really aren't that different. I was trying to establish one important difference, i.e. meal times. But by the time I got him to tell me that he had dinner at 11:00 p.m., his dialoguing time in my class was over. I could have asked him to explain why that question seemed so strange and was so hard for him to answer. Maybe I could have gotten even more interesting information than just "11:00."

Another venue for explanation concerned terminology. Lexical clarification turned into opportunities for students to explain their jobs and job systems. Here's an example with Marie-Angeles, Madrid, level seven:

> MA: You asked me what I do in a hospital. I'm a doctor of general medicine. Namely, I work out the hospital in the "ambulatario". This institution doesn't have in U.S.A.
> Janet: What's an ambulatario? Please explain.
> MA: You asked me what is an ambulatraio. I can't explain you very well. Because I think you haven't in the USA.

She then gave me long explanation with an organizational chart. I still honestly did not get it.

> Janet: Ok, I still don't understand ambulatario very well. Is it like an emergency room? Or like a triage? In the States, we also see a general practitioner first who refers us to specialists. Is an ambultario like a clinic?

The dialogue continued for a few more tries. I don't think I ever really understood, except that it really doesn't exist in the States. I really didn't understand and she really wanted to explain it. We worked together to arrive at a common understanding, as partners.

Jose Luis, in level four from Madrid, also explained his function in the army, without me eliciting that information:

> My activity is "ENLACE" Guadalajara-Madrid. To be "Enlace" consist in take letters and documents cf quarter Guadalajara at quarter Madrid every day in the morning only, for that I can go to the English class in ACHNA.

There are many mistakes here, but I got such a clear picture of what he did that I did not need to pursue it.

Alicia, also from Madrid, but a raw beginner in my Vermont class, was a botany student. We had quite an interesting discussion about mushrooms:

> Alicia: The mushrooms are very interesting becose are different composed cell what the vegetal cell and some composed equal animal cell..."

To be honest, I might not have understood even if her English had been perfect. But I understood that she was really interested in mushrooms and that she knew more about them than I did and that she could express this clearly. My next response to her was:

> Janet: You know a lot about mushrooms! They are hard for me to understand. You say that some have vegetable cells and some are like animal cells? Can you explain more about "vegtabal cells"?

And off we went: a week dialoguing about mushrooms. I learned about mushroom cells and she got to practice discussing her area of specialization with a native speaker, a skill, according to the Foreign Service Institute scale (Valette 1977, 158), well above her language level.

Explaining, a language function so often overlooked in language classrooms, truly brings life to the dialogue journal process. It incorporates all of my learning assumptions, allowing students to use the target language to bridge genuine communication gaps on areas in which they are the experts. The results are frustrating, instructive, amusing, and exciting.

Well into the dialogue journal process now, volunteering topics, experimenting with the language they possess to actually communicate, investing in a very different and new student/teacher interaction, the students were growing and learning. I was growing and learning as well, but my side of the partnership involved different issues.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TEACHER'S SIDE OF THE DIALOGUE

Every night I would sit in front of a pile of dialogue journals, take a deep breath, and one by one, read and respond. I would read my students' entries and target certain areas for response. This was by no means a mechanical chore. Composing a response was sometimes very easy. Sometimes it took a great deal of thinking before a suitable response would materialize. Occasionally, "Please tell me more" was all I could write.

My responses seemed to serve two distinct and sometimes conflicting purposes. On one level, I responded as a dialogue partner, sharing ideas, problems, observations and experiences. My responses reflected my interest and involvement in the topics being discussed. On another more subtle level, as the language teacher and initiator of the process, I worked with the students' language, using various techniques to promote the dialogue, and to strengthen my partners' ability to communicate clearly. My responses were constructed to highlight the segments of their entries which seemed most linguistically problematic to them, while seemingly focusing on high areas of interest. This duality of function in my dialogue participation gave me a gnawing feeling of discomfort about what my role really was.

It is the nature and intention of my responses, and through them, my role in the dialogue journal partnership I will study in this chapter. I will begin by describing the ways in which I responded to the students as a both a dialogue journal teacher and partner, and continue by evaluating my use of these techniques within the dialogue journal partnership. In the final paragraphs, I will evaluate my presence in the dialogue journal and what new directions I plan to take.

As a Teacher

Correction

The one kind of response I vowed to never make, a vow I have honored, was overt correction. If the objective for dialogue journals is to engage the students in authentic dialogue, then there is no place in it to emphasis, or even draw attention, to my role as teacher and evaluator. To do so risks turning a communication experience, a dialogue among equals, into an explicitly taught language lesson. Not only can this seriously sabotage any budding dialogic relationship, but it is not pedagogically sound. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis:

> ...language acquisition can only take place when a message which is being transmitted is understood, i.e. when the focus is on what is being said rather than on the form of

> the message. This could be referred to as the 'Great Paradox of Language Teaching': Language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning. (Krashen and Terrell 1983, 55)

I used two stories in my teacher's workshops to illustrate the effect correction can have on the dialogue journal process.

The first comes from the film "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie." A young student, hopelessly in love with her handsome English teacher, receives a response to the love letter she has carefully crafted. She opens the envelope with trembling hands. He had returned her letter, we see, covered with red pen corrections. She throws herself out the window, having failed to engage her teacher in a dialogue. By correcting her letter, he has shattered her dreams of any kind of partnership.

The teacher's red-ink corrections screamed out, in a way the enamored student clearly heard, "We don't have a relationship. I don't receive any messages. Don't expect more than red ink from me." His message was appropriate in this case. He is not and does not seek to be her lover. But the same principle operates for less inappropriate exchanges. Correction effectively shuts down interpersonal communications. We automatically exclude ourselves as equal partners when we correct, grade or evaluate the form of the other's message, specially in an overt, explicit way. The same message gets across whether it's one's illicit proposition which gets returned with corrections or one's account of what happened last weekend.

The other anecdote illustrates in not very subtle terms how correction gets in the way of the the message:

> Little Edward, a first grader, announced to his teacher that he "ain't got no pencil."
> "Edward, no, no no. I don't have a pencil, you don't have a pencil, she doesn't have a pencil, they don't have a pencil, we don't have a pencil."
> Edward looked around the classroom confused:
> "You mean nobody ain't got no pencils?"

This is a classic example of miscommunication. The humor comes from the juxtaposition of two unrelated missions: a boy searching for a pencil and his teacher correcting grammar.

A teacher, who is so invested in her corrector role that all utterances become opportunities for grammar lessons. sees conversations in terms of paragraphs, sentences, subjects, verbs, adverbs, commas, hanging in balloons over the speaker's head, all to be correctly placed and used. She only gets the message when everything is in its proper place. At worst, she can also be extremely patronizing. She may well mistake clumsiness of language for slowness of mind. She might well have shook her head at his response and declared him hopeless, perhaps to the class.

Unlike the teacher in the Jean Brodie story, for whom correction precisely conveyed the message he had intended (i.e. stay away!), Little Edward's teacher did not get her intended message across. Little Edward received her grammar lesson as an information exchange. He, either in innocence or defiance, carried on despite that fact that his utterance had been reduced to a language lesson.

He also understood the teacher's correct English. Had he been given that particular structure as a grammar exercise, he might have been able to reproduce it correctly. But he just wanted that pencil and wanted and expected his message to be heard. He ignored the grammar lesson and proceeded along message lines. He is oblivious to the pedantic.

This is not the kind of distance that fuels a non-hierarchal dialogue among equals. In both examples, the teachers, wittingly or unwittingly, used correction as a way to block an incoming message. Correction helped create a barrier between themselves and their students. In summary, correction does not appear to encourage a process based on communication and partnership.

Teacher Assists: Clarification Questions

Judith Wells Lindfors in her article "From Helping Hand to Reciprocity, to Mutuality: Dialogue Journal Writing with Zulu Students" describes dialogue journal writing as "a collaborative task between partners of different levels of competence". While she never corrects, she uses what she terms "assists" that encouraged her students to continue to participate in an on-going dialogue: interaction assists, structure assists and content assists (Lindfors 1988, 66). In my work, her assists are manifested by clarification questions, modeling and generating and maintaining topics.

My first point of business as a partner in the dialogue journal process in general and in each response in particular is to clarify any possible miscommunications caused by students' errors or mistakes. It is very different, as a language teacher, to say to a student: "This is what I understand. Is that what you intended for me to understand? " than to say "This sentence is not correct." Students, invested in a dialogue with their teacher/partners want to make themselves understood. Corrections are made by the student, not for the sake of accuracy in itself, but because greater accuracy helps to clarify their meaning.

Mirabel, level 4 in Madrid, had no problem with the grammar exercises on the present perfect, but often misused it in the freer context of the dialogue journal. She had already sat through several long explanations on the present perfect to no avail. Examples like "I studied French since 1978" were not uncommon. Our big breakthrough occurred by accident in the following exchange:

Mirabel: Hi Janet! I lived in my apartment for 10 years. It is very near your apartment.
Janet: Hi Mirabel! Where do you live now? Do you like your new apartment?
Mirabel: Hi Janet! Sorry! I have lived in my apartment for 10 years. I don't have new apartment.

Targeting her error was completely inadvertent on my part. I took her statement at face value, not realizing that she had made a mistake. Indeed, my question was not intended to provide any clarification, but to encourage her to tell me more about her life. But when she saw that I had misunderstood, she was able to identify the cause of confusion and make her own correction, by clarifying her statement. It was through experiencing the consequences of her error, i.e. miscommunication, that she finally learned the difference between the tenses. Her usage was not perfect after this episode, but was markedly improved.

Mirabel's example demonstrated that manipulating the dialogue to force student-generated correction is unnecessary. Trying to be understood was the driving force behind her self-correction. Her self-taught lesson stuck with her in a way that covert correction and explanations had not. I received a reaffirmation of my belief in the learning power of safe, uncorrected and authentic communication.

Sometimes students insisted on retaining words that they would cause misunderstandings for native speakers. I had a week long discussion with a student in level eleven in Madrid over his use of the word "air conditioner" to describe the ventilation system in the classroom. I explained that "air conditioners" were only cold air systems. That didn't make sense to him, because in Spanish, "air conditioners" literally conditioned the air, hot or cold. I agreed with his logic, and tried to explain that languages are not always logical. My request for clarification turned into an interesting dialogue, even though he insisted on retaining his version.

Sometimes students meant exactly what they said, even though I didn't understand it. I asked Esther, level seven from Madrid what she meant by "When I think in the road that I have to walk for speak English". Did she really mean "walk" or "work"?. Her response was:"I really mean "walk" It's one symbol." Rather than being told that she was wrong, she got feedback that her symbolism didn't work for a native speaker. It never came up again.

Sometimes students can't clarify. When talking about his girlfriend, Alex from Milan, beginner at the Experiment, says:

Alex: My girlfriend skies in Italy in Alpi. She is holt in love. She is not fine when have the people.
Janet: Can you explain "She is holt in love'? And she is not fine when other people are there? What other people?
Alex: I left my girlfriend because with other people she is holt. This people is all my friends and other people.
Janet: Alex, I still don't understand "holt". Can you explain?
Alex: For me "holt" is one persone some lovely.

After that, I gave up. I still have no idea what "holt" means.

Asking for clarification, then, provided a way to respond that allowed me to work on my students' language within my role as a dialogue partner among equals. I could quite naturally and legitimately highlight problem language areas in the students' entries through my clarification questions, although I could not control students' recognition or even acknowledgment that an error had been made. My requesting clarification gave students the chance to explain, change, or retain their language choices as it suited their meaning, their ability and their temperament.

Teacher Assist: Modeling

I became an expert in modeling language with the birth of my first child. I hadn't realized it until a friend showed astonishment at the following conversation when my daughter was eleven months old:

> Genny: M'wanwawa!!!
> Janet: Do you want water? Ok. Here's some water for you.

My technique was to repeat whatever she said in clear English and then respond. If I misunderstood, I got feedback in the form of an angry scream. I would try another restatement until we understood each other.

Modeling was a way for me to provide through demonstration, in context, the language needed to better express what she wanted to express. She might or might not have noted the modeling, and might or might not have been able to reproduce it, but it was there. By modeling, I said what she had not been able to say for herself, correctly at least.

Modeling can be easily applied to L_2 learners as well, in situation which Lindfors qualifies as the "helping hand" level of dialogue journal interaction. This is the level where the partner with the lower level of competency relies on the other partner to "give the language" needed to get the message across. When Pietro wrote that "his sister has twenty-five years", I responded by restating that his sister is twenty-six and my sister is thirty-four. I can then ask more about his sister to continue the conversation.

As we have seen in Mirabel's example in the preceding section, lessons are caught, not taught. By using modeling, instead of correction, I didn't always know if the lessons were caught. This is an example from Amparo from Madrid, level eight:

Amparo: You say "Don't think, just write. But it isn't so easy. Words don't come easy. Really, I'm thinking about what I could write, but today my mind is terribly white.
Janet: I hope your mind isn't blank today. But you write well, even with a blank mind!

She never again spoke about having a white mind or a blank mind. I'll never know if she caught it or not.

Esther, from level seven in Madrid, writes:

Esther: In this moment, I'm a private teacher of latin.
Janet: So, you're a Latin teacher. Do many people study Latin now? Why?
Esther: Latin...in the secondary and in the high school

is a obligate subject...
Janet: So, Latin is a required subject in high school here. Wow! Not in the U.S.

She never responds directly to my modeling. For example, she never says "Yes, I'm a Latin teacher" or "Yes, Latin is a required subject." I could have framed my response in way that would have elicited these target structures, but that would not have carried forward our discussion of teaching languages. Modeling only seems effective when reinforcing the topic, not the syntax. Otherwise, it takes on a drill-like, artificial quality.

Pilar, a chronic user of "I'm agree with you", showed me that she picked up on one of my expressions:

Janet: I agree with you. Spain is very rich. It has lots to do and see. [I went onto write about the Spanish elementary school system]
Pilar: I agree with you. The Spanish school are enough bad.

She deleted "am" without any coaching from me. Simply seeing it in context showed her how to use it.

Alicia, a raw beginner in Vermont from Madrid whom I taught the summer before going to Madrid myself, wrote in her very first dialogue journal entry:

Alicia: I'm been one month in ACNHA in 1975.
Janet: Oh, you were at ACHNA in 1975? That's a long time ago! Is it a good school?
Alicia: Yes, I were at ACHNA one month only. I think that the ACHNA is very good school in Madrid.

She incorrectly modeled my use of "were," but she correctly moved from present perfect to simple past. She also correctly changed "in" to "at." She deleted "a" which I had modeled in "Is it a good school?" and added "the" before ACHNA, which I had not modeled. All told, my modeling yielded two positive changes without overtly pointing out mistakes, plus the very useful and reassuring piece of information that, according to Alicia, my future place of employment had a good reputation in Madrid.

Pablo of Madrid, level three, presents in his entry below an example of overgeneralizing a modeled structure:

Pablo: What do you do?
Janet: I'm a teacher, of course! What do you do?
Pablo: I'm a student of architecture, of course!

As his teacher, I felt it was obvious that what I do is teach. "Of course" refers to this obvious fact. Now, hopefully Pablo was joking by echoing my "of course" in his less obvious response (how could I know that he was an architect student within the context of the ESL class?), or he picked up my "of course" as a model for an appropriate response and used it in his own. Again, I could have tested him by throwing in some other "of courses," but that never made sense in the context. I let it go.

Working to understand the student's message through clarification and modeling took the focus off evaluating form . Both techniques provided a safe, non-intrusive way to give students language and dignity at the same time. The teacher is not imposing her agenda on the student, but rather helping the student better express her own. Instead of having students repeat words or sentences in order to learn them, I restated their entries in "good" English and trusted that, if they were ready, they would pick up the differences between my English and theirs. Corrections came as by-products of our mutual efforts to understand each other.

Teacher Assists: The Interviewer

Generating and maintaining the dialogue was a concern. As a teacher, I could have required a composition on a topic of their choice, or that they write ten lines a day in their journal. But as a dialogue partner, I could not require their participation. My dilemma was to make them write without actually forcing them to write. How to be the kind of dialogue partner who would encourage and inspire them to open up?

I chose interviewers as my model. Good interviewers maintain conversations by asking perceptive, intelligent questions, listening carefully to the answers to continue formulating more perceptive questions until the interview is over. They are themselves fairly neutral, seeking only to understand and bring out their subjects.

The typical interviewer has a topic-oriented agenda. My agenda was to keep the students writing. Rather than outwardly dominating or determining the dialogue journal process by choosing the topic, I worked to respond to the basic feeling, tone, values, goals, and insights expressed in each entry and then letting each student hear what I had understood by reflecting back the sense of what he/she said gives the student the support he/she needs to move away from inhibiting performance expectations and take some writing risks. Being understood, so closely entwined with being accepted and valued, as we have seen in some of the student's examples, is almost miraculous in the way it allows people to open up.

Grammar became a topic of discussion for Mercedes, level three in Madrid:

> Mercedes: Why do you use past if the action didn't finish? "This morning" is in the past, but the day hasn't finished. Why that?"
>
> Janet: I see that this is a problem for you. So, you think that the we should only use the past for something that happened yesterday or before yesterday? Is this true for Spanish?

Rather than giving her an explanation, my response sought to bring her out by first acknowledging her frustration, and then drawing on her knowledge of tenses in her own language. Her defensiveness diffused as we got into a fascinating discussion about how different cultures look at time.

This "bringing people out" technique backfired with such topics as death, when students don't want to write more. Maria Angeles, the ambulatario doctor from Madrid, level seven, wrote:

> MA: Hi Janet. I don't feel like writing anything today. One cousin had a traffic accident. He was killed.

Janet: Oh, M.A., I'm sorry to hear about your cousin. Do you want to tell me more about him?
M.A.: Hi Janet. I prefer don't speak about my cousin. Because it's very hurting for me. It's very early to speak about it.

She went on to talk about being a woman doctor in Spain. I felt terrible. I had tried to use her cousin's death to generate more entries. Simply "I can see why you didn't want to write yesterday. I'm sorry." would have been more appropriate. She might have been able to generate a new topic in her next entry without my assist.

At times, my interviewer technique generated no more than endlessly polite and meaningless exchanges. In these cases, I would change from the interested, understanding interviewer to the antagonistic one. The goal, however, was always to generate more entries.

I surprised one student by telling him that no, I didn't like Spanish food, that I found it too oily and salty. This got us into a spirited argument about the comparative values of hamburgers versus Spanish tortillas and hot dogs versus paella. I got to be myself and had a chance to learn about his opinion about American fast foods.

After experimenting with a number of topics with Luis, level seven in Madrid, and, importantly, knowing his sense of humor and his love of a good debate, I wrote:

Janet: Luis, you seem very literary for a military person. Aren't all military people interest in soccer, drinks and women?

Luis: I think you have a very (I don't know how to say it in English) concept of the militaries.. I believe you don't know a lot of tem neither in Spain nor in the USA. You should know more them.. I think you should know that the more important scietiffics in XVII,, XVIII and XIX centuries were militeries and the sailors (remember Captain Cook, for example),and a lot of writers were soldiers like de la Barca...[time was up]

Janet: Wow! Maybe I was wrong about military people! Am I? What did Captain Cook write? I don't remember!

Luis: I'm going to tell you some more about the military people because I see you have a wrong opinion.

And he did, in great detail. He wrote a lot. I learned a lot. I had hit paydirt. I also noticed that he shifted from "militaries," a common error among my Spanish students, to "the military people." "The" makes the phrasing awkward, but it's closer to my version.

Alex, an 18 year old from Milan, one of my raw beginners, wrote his most spirited entry in response to the following provocation:

Janet: Alex, you need to come to class. Please talk to me...You go to sleep at 3:00 a.m. Of course you are late to class...

He read my entry sitting slouched in his chair, half-asleep, in his usual "morning after" posture. He suddenly bolted up and began writing non-stop for a good five minutes. His neighbor, Victoria, stopped her own writing and watched him in amazement. The gist was:

> Alex: I most exsplicar you, for me, the night if LIFE, in Italy some the people life the night, for we is very important. Ok, don't all the people, but the 70% thenk so.

He really wanted me to understand this, and he gave his writing an energy that he had not given previously.

I never wanted encouraged topics that put me in the role of corrector, despite student requests. Rosa wrote:

> I want to ask you something. How is my writing, I know is not too good, would you give some rules to write better, please?

My response was always to acknowledge how important good writing/correct grammar was to them and to ask for specific guidelines from them on how to proceed. Did they want me to look at their spelling, punctuation, syntax, vocabulary? I also told them that since we worked on these areas in class I didn't really want to do that in the dialogue journal.

Mercedes, level three at ACHNA, was the only student to ever sucessfully pursue this. Determined to get more correction on the grammar lesson, she used to dialogue journal to extend her lesson into a private tutorial:

> Hello Janet: Before start, please could you tell me if this sentences are corret?

She then wrote ten sentences, followed by "Thanks for your help," and then picked up the discussion of what museums to see in Madrid.

Charo from Madrid, level seven, wrote:

> I would like you to write more longer letters and you could write on my bad words and write good words.

Charo's entry echoes the previous request for more grammar guidance, and adds a desire to hear more from me. She is responding to my practice of avoiding being in an information-giving or expert position, this being too close to the traditional teacher's role. When asked about life in the United States, for example, I could almost always turn the question into a way to discuss my partner's interests and experiences. Questions like "What do you think it's like?" or "What's most interesting to you about the United States?" while supplying perhaps only a sentence or two of my own experiences could launch the student into several day's worth of entries.

My interviewing techniques, either as the understander or or the provoker, successfully moved the dialogues along. I was excited about my students' high level of participation in what was for many their first sustained dialogue with a native speaker. Many of my dialogue partners felt understood, accepted and therefore willing to bring more to the classroom than just a list of memorized verbs. They were willing to open up to me on subjects that they reported had previously been closed.

Variations on the Interviewer/Partner

Within the traditional classroom, boundaries are created, in part, by having the teacher function as corrector and judge and by not allowing the learner to use herself as a topic of study. In the dialogue journal context, both of these constraints are effectively eliminated. What boundaries are appropriate in a dialogue journal relationship? How "understanding" should the teacher/partner be? At what point does provoking become inticing? To be present in the dialogue, how much should I reveal of myself? If the learners are to be encouraged to study themselves, how much should I encourage them to reveal?

At my teacher workshops, at least two people came up to me afterwards to confide in hushed tones that students were falling in love with them via the dialogue journal. Their understanding responses, their interest in the student's topics and the very intimacy the dialogue journal permits between teacher and student created a love affair in the minds of a few of the Spanish students. Interestingly, the teachers were sure this had only happened to them.

I admit that I also tread on dangerous ground by encouraging discussions of students' love lives, always a hot topic. Whereas Alicia was eternally grateful to have a confidante, maybe I could have found other things to discuss with Jose Antonio, a handsome, young, single engineer. My efforts to maintain student interest by pursuing this line of conversation earned me, a married mother of two, an invitation for a home-cooked meal in his apartment. I used the invitation as a springboard to discuss Spanish men as cooks, and how he learned to cook. The invitation was never again mentioned.

Another challenge in the boundary question is how far to go into the students' language territory. I have felt this very real pull in beginning English as a Second Language classes where I had little or no knowledge of the students' native languages, and consequently there was no common language. Who is teaching what language to whom? If understanding each other is the only criterion, how far do we lean towards their language in order to understand them? Who is doing the work? And who is doing the learning? How much is too much for me and not enough for them?

Becoming enmeshed with the culture of the students while supposedly representing my own is a another inappropriate kind of partnership. One example is when I had my raw beginners in Vermont visit a local supermarket and afterwards, make posters showing what they would have bought for a family of four, including prices. One of my colleagues came in to look. He pointed out that some groups had written the dollar sign after the price. I hadn't even noticed it. It was too familiar to me. Because of his more objective eyes, I was later able to point this out to the class.

Another symptom of enmeshment is developing and accepting a special in-class interlanguage rather than maintaining our own native version, like referring to Army personnel as "militaries," or saying "difficult," a Spanish cognate, instead of the more commonly used "hard."

Learning can take place in these partnerships, but probably not the learning that all had originally contracted for. These partnerships are inappropriate and ineffective. Clearly and obviously what is needed is a solid working partnership with clean boundaries.

Evaluation

The Dark Side

Working together, dialoguing as partners, requires, as Freire says:

> an intense faith in man, faith in his power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in his vocation to be more fully human... the "dialogical man" believes in other men even before he meets them face to face.(Freire 1970, 62)

While faith in my students and in their natural powers of acquisition is my touchstone belief, the ivory-tower perfectionist grammar teacher in me would not be completely stilled. Feeling pressed to evaluate their grammar, I couldn't remain entirely present in the dialogue as a player. My teaching responsibilities kept asserting themselves. An inner voice kept repeating: "My job is to teach students a language. My classroom is still a classroom. I still teach grammar and am still obligated to present the structures that will be on the final. I still decide if they will go on to the next level, or stay behind." It was hard not to read or respond to their entries as the teacher I promised I wouldn't be, but that I was.

This was most apparent in my use of teacher assists. I believe that I used modeling and asking for clarification in a skillful, unobtrusive way. I asked my raw beginners and some of my students in Spain to look over the entries and find some examples of the above. Students were especially surprised to note that I had been modeling them. In fact, most students denied that I had been modeling their language and were surprised to find proof in their dialogue journals.

But, what were my intentions? Was I asking for clarification about something I really didn't know and wanted to know, or was I asking to guide the student toward correction? In a break in my dialogue journal partner covenant in which I've promised not to evaluate, judge or control, I was evaluating, judging and attempting to sway the dialogue towards the grammar of the day.

By using modeling in a such a deliberate way, i.e. by studying each entry and deciding how my response could best benefit the student's learning of grammar, I was cheating. My covert grammar manipulations reveal a lack of faith and respect in my partners' learning abilities and an overpowering need on my part to control the language acquisition component of our dialogue. I was unwilling to let them learn whatever they might pick up from my entries.

In the end, I am not sure that my efforts to direct their learning made a difference actually improved their language acquisition. Indeed, it appears that my students picked up whatever they could and wanted to, despite my efforts.

The other area where my participation in the dialogue partnership seems to fall short of my ideal was in my role as the interviewer. I am not sure that a role reversal which allows the student to fill the teacher with information, thoughts and experiences with little reciprocity is not as patronizing as the more traditional role. As an interviewer, my dialogue journal partners were actually my subjects whom I controlled. For my partners, I was a means by which they could better express themselves. My partners saw their own reflections in my responses instead of seeing me. My entries did not usually reflect me or my interests. They reflected someone trying to keep the dialogue moving. I was neutral.

I was also apprehensive about letting the students generate their own topics. Although topics came from their entries, my questions did not often allow them to start a new topic on their own. In many ways, I carried the dialogue, and my partners simply followed my lead.

The Bright Side

The positive side of my use of clarification, modeling and interviewing cannot be quantified in absolute terms, but in degrees. I was not able to absolutely relinquish my role as a grammar teacher, but I was able to step away from it in some important ways.

Even though my use of modeling was sometimes inconsistent with my assumptions, using modeling instead of correction was a substantial move from the judge/judged relationship. By not overtly correcting their entries, my response provided a model for them to reproduce or simply to comprehend, depending on their level of readiness.

I showed some faith in my partners' learning capabilities by not creating situations within the dialogue journal in which they would have to demonstrate their learning of specific grammar points. I learned to appreciate and admire their learning strategies and to not to interfere with them.

I respected the value of focusing on the topic. Through my interviewer model, content was emphasized through the worst mistakes, through nearly incomprehensible language without asking for accuracy unless it was necessary. By committing myself to stay with the topic, I was willing to have less control over the language-improvement results of the dialogue journal process. I was more accepting of my lack of control over students' language acquisition. I wasn't as invested as I have been in the past in the students' success, as measured in quantifiable units of syntax internalized.

Lastly, by giving the students the almost exclusive right to choose the topic, I did, in fact, take a first step in readjusting scales that have been weighted on the traditional teacher's side for so long. The more refined balancing is still to come.

Summary

I have shown that the techniques I used, and role I played, were in the most part very appropriate to dialogue journals and to my assumptions. Modeling, asking for clarification, and playing the interviewer provided them the "assists" that they needed to be able to communicate with me despite our different levels of English competence. My helping hand, ever present in the dialogue, helped to maintain the dialogue. This prevented me from fully participating in the dialogue. However, as long as I concentrated solely on the students' learning, this tended to prevent me from fully participating in the dialogue.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEARNING PARTNERS

When my helping hand concerned itself primarily with student learning, and not with our partnership, the partnership felt unbalanced and I felt uncomfortable. But when I lent a helping hand because I wanted to learn more about my students and their cultures and wanted them to learn about me, the quality of our partnership changed. When curiosity and genuine interest guided my responses, and the students' entries reflected the same kind of involvement, our partnership sparkled with an exciting reciprocity. Our writing back and forth had a real reason: we were learning about each other.

In this chapter, I will present examples of this kind of a reciprocal learning partnership. First, I describe what other teachers and I learned through our students in the dialogue journals. Illustrations come from my dialogue journals and from those of my colleagues at ACHNA. The latter sections are devoted to the students and what they said they learned about their teachers. I draw examples from a three-page survey that my raw beginners completed about their dialogue journal experience, unsolicited and/or informal feedback from my classes in Spain, and what I observed their learning to be.

For Teachers:

Knowing Students Better

Knowing who my students are, what their concerns are, what parts of language learning are challenging for them, and what causes them to accept or reject my teaching helps me do a better job. The dialogue journal proved to be an invaluable way to gain insights into my students.

One ACHNA teacher was disturbed by a student who seemed moody and bored. The teacher began dialogue journals halfway through a ten-week session, and got the key to her student's behavior in the student's first entry. The explanation was completely unsolicited. The student was in the first trimester of her first pregnancy, and felt awful. She apologized for not being more receptive and participatory in the class and assured the teacher that she really liked being there. The teacher, herself a mother, responded with her own morning sickness stories, and the dialogue was rolling. This student was no longer a problem.

Another teacher was surprised to learn through an aside in a journal entry that a student was partially deaf. The student had written: "...as you know, I can't hear from my left ear." The teacher did not know, and was grateful to get that information.

In both cases, the teachers spoke Spanish fluently. Their students could have easily explained their situations before or after class. But, this kind of valuable and personal information seemed to be much more forthcoming within the dialogue journal relationship.

The same was true on my side of information-giving. When my husband went to the States for a short trip, leaving me with our two children, the dialogue journals became a place for some students, other mothers with traveling husbands, to provide solace and support. My other students were not even aware that my husband was away. Somehow, mentioning it in the dialogue journal seemed fitting. Mentioning it to a classroom of students did not.

Inappropriate classroom behavior was much easier to deal with through dialogue journals. Challenging a student face-to-face on their actions can be daunting. Asking for clarification on behaviors, done in the same mode as asking for clarification on vocabulary, often helped to diffuse potentially explosive situations. Examples like Alex from Milan who was always late to class because of his love for the night, were easier to deal within the dialogue journal. The dialogue journal gave me a very individualized handle on each student.

The dialogue journal helped me learn about people who would have otherwise surely remained anonymous. Jorge, level twelve at

ACHNA, entered the class in the middle of a ten-week session. The group had been together through the previous eleven levels, for a two year period. An exclusive ambience had been established that I had problems entering. Jorge was finding it impossible.

The dialogue journal was essential in creating a link between us. Without the dialogue journal, he would have most probably been one of those lost, quiet students who sit in the corner. In a class of very vocal and aggressive students, he would have never become a person to me. Through the dialogue journal, he became a person with a job, a family, opinions and values.

A side benefit was that by virtue of knowing Jorge better through our dialogue, I was better able to help him integrate into the group. Without compromising the confidentiality of the journal, it became a community-building tool.

Dialogue journal entries helped me understand how I was perceived as a teacher, and how students felt about being members of their class. An example from Rosa from Madrid, level eight:

> Hi Janet! How are you doing? I'm really happy to attender your class. I like the funny people like you, and I like your methods.

That made my day!

I also got other feedback, like the following from Esther, from Madrid, level seven describing her discomfort in my class:

> ...I have some problems because the people speak in Spanish (and me) sometimes and they speak of their problems in Spanish in the English class. And my problem is: I don't understand everything and every time I try to do it. I think there are too many people in the class (sixteen, I think) and in one hour it's not possible to speak everybody. Only the "braves" speak and sometimes the others. But I know, it's normal.

I was moved by her description of only the "braves" talking in class. It was a valuable reminder to me about how it feels to be in a classroom situation from the student's perspective. By becoming aware, thanks to Esther, I began giving more opportunities to the "scareds."

As people learning about people, my colleagues and I became available to receive messages that our students had judged inappropriate in other contexts. By moving towards a more balanced partnership with our students through the dialogue journal process, I became a recipient of information that, ironically, helped me to be a better teacher.

Cultural Information

At any given time during my thirteen months with dialogue journals, I had from twelve to thirty-six dialogue journal partners. This translates into twelve to thirty-six cultural informants from whom I received a wealth of cultural information.

I learned from my Experiment students that Japanese teenagers like to talk as much as we do. (But, interestingly, I did not observe this behavior in class.) I got a sense of what Istanbul is like from a Turkish tour guide. I found out that the new Les Halles is the place to be in Paris nowadays. A Genoan mountain climber compared the Italian Alps to Yosemite. And I learned how blind children are educated in Germany from an extraordinary blind student.

In Spain, the information I received was not only fascinating, but also important for my everyday functioning. Mariangeles helped us get a phone problem straightened out through her aunt who works for Telefonica, the Spanish telephone company. Via the dialogue journal I heard about the best wines to buy, the best restaurants to go to, the best records to buy and where to go on vacation. I found a very chic place to get a haircut through a student whose hair I admired. An art historian told me what museums to go to; an architect told me what building to check out. I got inside information on the Jewish museum in Toledo from a student who worked there. I discussed politics with students of political science, from communists to Francoists.

One important cultural awareness and breakthrough for me occurred thanks to the dialogue journal. Before going to Spain, I had been vehemently opposed to bullfights. As bullfighting season drew near, more and more students began mentioning it in their journals. Juan Pablo, level seven, wrote:

> I like bullfights, but I never have been at any. I wanted to go, but it's so expansive for me, I'm only a poor student. I have seen some bullfights on TV. You could buy tickets for next San Isidro's Fiesta. I think you'd like it. The people say it's something magic.

It was through this entry, and others, that I began to see how much of Spanish culture is based on the metaphor of the bullfight. I went and was absolutely and surprisingly enthralled. It gave me an essential piece in the puzzle of a culture that I had known little about before my arrival there.

Through the use of dialogue journals, I received cultural information that I couldn't have and didn't get anywhere else. I felt connected. I had a sense of the spirit of where I was, and who I was sharing a classroom with that I didn't get through other classroom activities.

For students and teachers, reciprocity in dialogue journals implies a give and take relationship. Sometimes I learned from my students, and sometimes they learned from me. The lines of communication were fluid. We shifted in and out of roles as suited the dialogue. Sometimes the students were very invested in telling their stories. Less frequently, they were invested in pulling out stories from me. Sometimes, nothing seemed very interesting. What follows are examples of how the reciprocity of the dialogue journal relationship was manifested in students' writings:

For Students:

Trust

Reciprocity between teachers and students is not always a common feature of many teacher/student relationships. For a student who is accustomed to the teacher serving as a judge, reciprocity requires a special trust. She needs to believe that the teacher will not ridicule, criticize or misuse the contents of her entries. For example, using mistakes from dialogue journals for use in grammar practice would certainly violate this trust.

It was through trial and error that I became aware of another essential ingredient to a trusting reciprocal dialogue relationship: confidentiality. I asked my raw beginners in Vermont to share what they wrote with a partner before giving me their journals. To my surprise, they all refused, quite emphatically telling me the journals are "confidential." I hadn't thought that describing a week-end in New York or sharing what they ate the night before in the cafeteria was private. This underestimation of their investment in our one-on-one partnership was never repeated.

American Culture

While I was learning about them and their cultures, they reported that they had also learned about me. They had a chance to ask me about if I liked Stevie Wonder, if I was happy in

Brattleboro, if I found it difficult to teach English, what I thought about dancing the tango with the class Romeo at the class party, if the man they saw me with on the streets of Madrid was my husband, who my favorite painter was, and "why you like this work?". I always made sure that they understood that I belong to a small subgroup of Americans, but they seemed to equate getting to know me with getting to know "Americans" anyway and were satisfied with their cross-cultural experience. With my other groups, this type of exchange typically occurred towards the end of the session at a special party or outing, but it was ongoing with the dialoguers.

Pro-active Voices

Students are used to and expect to learn from their teachers. What astonishes them and often fuels their communication is the opportunity to share their own areas of interest with their interested teacher/partner. Students told me that the dialogue journals gave them a chance to be the expert.

A few experiences in my classes showed me how powerful this experience was for the students, and how hard it is for them to go back to the passive receiver role.

One incident illustrated this for me by way of a reversal. What happens to the dialogue journal process when a class who is just beginning to invest in the reciprocity of the dialogue journal partnership feels required to revert to a hierarchical system in which students write on assigned topics?

In the second week of a ten-week session at ACHNA, I took a day off. The substitute asked my students to write in their journals, as I had instructed. Their entries from that day puzzled me. There was a palpable difference in their writing. The sentences had changed to shorter, simpler patterns, much like the written grammar exercise examples. The tone was unnatural and stilted and did not flow with their previous entries.

All except Alicia. She had previously established that her hot topic was Errol, an American living in Holland:

> Excuse me if always I speak you about Errol, but it is my favorite theme, the more nice in my life because my work is a bit bored and I don't have to many friends.

Nothing was going to make her stop writing about Errol. Her entry that day read:

> I could tell you about my studies, my hobbies, the last movie I saw, but these things aren't important to me.

and she continued writing about her favorite theme.

When I asked the students if they had been directed to write on the above, they sheepishly admitted that they had been given topics and felt unable to refuse. Writing about what they were supposed to, as opposed to what they were invested it, had made a noticeably effected in their entries. By shifting back to a hierarchical assigning of topics, they reverted back to simply playing the game. They seemed to reserve their truer written selves to a more reciprocal partnership.

Another exciting, but humbling, moment came the day before the five-week exam with this same class. I asked them to write in their journals about how they felt about the exam. I thought this was a reasonable and very sensitive process question that would surely help ease the tension they must have all been feeling.

There was an uproar. They had been rehearsing their entries in their heads all day. They did not want to drop their topics and write about mine. I did the honorable thing: I made my topic optional. I was pleased to note that within a three-week period, they had moved from nearly all accepting unquestioningly teacher-assigned topics to unanimously rejecting teacher suggestions.

I was equally pleased when the teacher who taught this class for the next ten-week session came to me for a quick course in dialogue journals. She had explained that the class insisted they continue. With or without me, the type of communication the dialogue journal allows had become indispensable to them.

Summary

By sharing details of our everyday lives, our secrets, our ideals, and our values I got the opportunity to especially know the Spanish people through the very individual and special people in my classes. My appreciation and eventually love of my surroundings did not develop exclusively because of the exchanges the dialogue journals permitted, but they played a large and vital part in that process.

My level eleven class stated uncategorically that introducing dialogue journals into the classroom was the best thing I had done. I have just shown that my level three/four class continued their dialogue even without me. From their own comments, and from what I observed, they learned through dialogue journals that their learning abilities were respected, indeed, that they were respected, interesting dialogue partners, and most importantly, that they could use the the languge they were learning to successfully understand and make understood something of their special inner vision.

CONCLUSION

As I have attempted to describe in this paper, the dialogue journal is a document which provides the framework for a small but significant classroom revolution, on an ideological level as well as a very practical language acquisition level. The non-banking system I advocate comes to life through the dialogue journal process in which learners are granted their own natural powers of learning in a learning partnership with their teachers, and are encouraged to use the new language to express that which they already know or want to know, including their own personal history.

Dialogue journals provide the framework through which language can be presented in an order that reflects the students need to communicate rather than in a strictly ordered grammar-based sequence. Students' are exposed to the language they are studying as it is used authentically. Clarity and accuracy become important not to score higher points on a final examination but so that meaning can be unambiguously expressed.

By participating in the process of this framework, the typical teacher/student roles no longer serve a purpose. In my exploration of suitable responses to my dialogue partners' entries, I found that my most appropriate responses were not those designed to improve students' language learning, but when I was simply a participant in the dialogue. By shedding the traditional roles within the dialogue journal context, my dialogue partner and I became human beings learning from each other, both working to create an understandable text made specifically for and by each other.

Shifting away from the banking system model, viewing learners as creative, problem-solvers with much to bring to a dialogic partnership, allowing them to acquire language at their own level, with a minimum of intervention, through authentic language use, along with the rewarding results of implementing these values through the dialogue journals are among the points I've discussed in this paper.

Because of and given all these advantages, my experience with dialogue journals is best summarized by the following instance.

In a survey I did of the raw beginners in Brattleboro, I asked them what they liked best about the dialogue journal Of all the answers I got back, I liked Agustin's the best. It captures for me the essence of a working dialogue journal partnership. But to better understand what made his succinct response so representative of the entire dialogue journal experience, some background is necessary.

Agustin was a very tall, unshaven, scary-looking teenager from Buenos Aires. He wore black leather even in the summer and he always looked hung-over. Other teachers would look at him and say with relief "Oh, he's in your class..." He spoke about four words of English. All his roommates were Hispanic and he never spoke English outside my classroom.

Most days, he would sit and stare at the blank pages of the dialogue journal, tapping his feet on the floor. Sometimes he would fall asleep. Sometimes he would draw pictures in the margins of cigarette packs, skulls and ying/yang symbols.

After a while, we developed a routine. He would read what I wrote. Then he would come up and ask me to tell him what I had written. Then I'd explain, in English. Then he'd sit down and tap some more, draw some more and sometimes write. I used every teacher assist I knew: asking for clarification, modeling, multiple choice questions, yes/no questions. I'd draw too and ask him about his drawings. We covered topics like rugby in Argentina, the tango, and smoking. These weren't the dynamic exchanges that I had hoped to have. They weren't even equal to the most lukewarm entries of other students in the class. But, something was there. He and I were carving out a partnership within the confines of the dialogue journal, despite the enormous differences in our language competencies, ages, cultures, and interests.

He could have used Spanish to answer the question "What did you like best about the dialogue journal?" He chose English, the language we had shared in our journal. His response was so simple and powerful: "Communication".

The answer reflects our relationship. Using language stripped to the bone, we forged responses back and forth, to reach into each other's worlds. Agustin didn't focus on sentence structure, which verb to use, or how to incorporate words from a vocabulary list. He concentrated on being understood and understanding his partner. He used every strategy, literally every word he knew so that he could participate in this communication experience called a dialogue journal.

Lindfors describes the process in this way:

> In order for us to reach our individual goals, we are engaging in a collaborative task in which both partners had to do the same things, namely, interpret the partner's written text and produce interpretable written text for the partner. To do this satisfactorily we had to work within a world defined by the set of possibilities and limitation that both of us brought to our task. I call this "mutuality." (Lindfors 1988, 77)

Through this process which focuses on authentic dialogue, exchanges are offered and received that speak to our desire to come to know each other as people, our readiness to reveal ourselves, and our sensitivity to matters of interest and importance to the other (Lindfors 1988). The pedagogical by-product is the confidence students gain in their language use generally, and in their writing specifically and the confidence teachers gain in their classroom presence.

By introducing mutuality into my classrooms, although imperfectly, I made an important shift from the banking system which requires students to be depositories for their depositor teachers to a system in which the students and teachers work together to create common ground in which they both can learn from each other.

Therein lies the source of my zeal for dialogue journals. When I responded to my dialogue partners out of this desire to contribute to this world build out of mutuality, my responses flowed. The more I learned about and from my partners, the less I tried to teach them the language we shared. Language acquisition was the last thing on my response agenda. I didn't spend time analyzing each student entry as when I was simply the helping hand in their writing. Instead of modeling to better bring home a linguistic challenge, I didn't consciously model at all. And by not consciously modeling, I was providing the most useful kind of model for a language learner: an interested native speaker.

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